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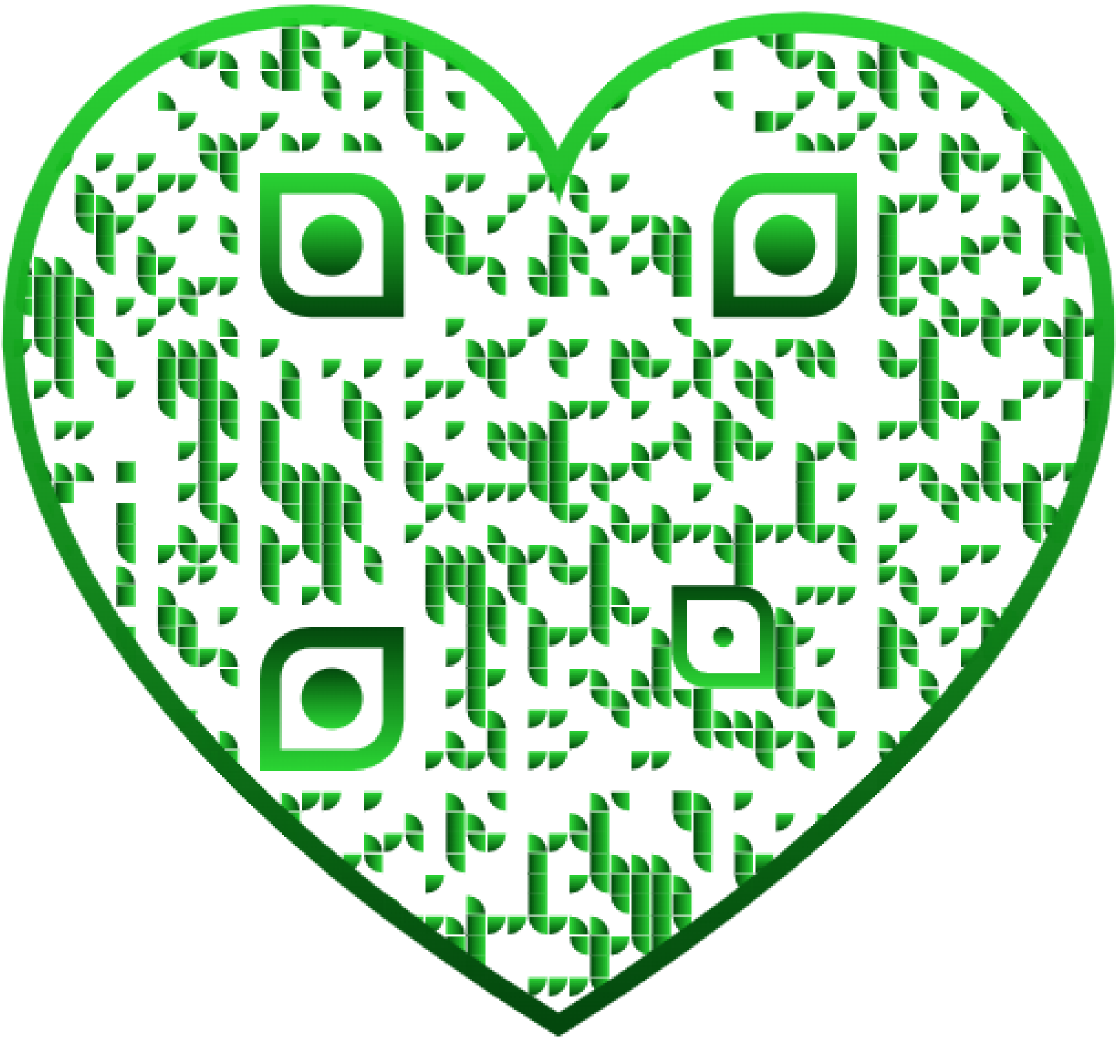

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Welcome

There is something quintessentially British about AC Cars. Founded as Auto Carriers Ltd in West London by the Weller brothers in 1901, it started life building three-wheeler commercial vehicles and light cars – experience that would stand it in good stead for its later, life-giving Ministry of Health contracts – but swiftly became best-known for the sporting machines it produced following a move to Thames Ditton, Surrey, before WW1.

Despite its cars' quality, proved in competition and record-breaking, it was a victim of the Great Depression and suffered the first of several slides into obscurity. Under the stewardship of the Hurlock family, however, AC would thrive with a series of superb sports cars.

Yet it was the input of a brash Texan that gave AC immortality in the annals of motoring history, as Carroll Shelby saw the potential of mating reliable, potent Ford V8 power with the nimble, elegant Ace, and the Cobra was born. Often copied but never bettered, the Cobra simply refuses to die, even reappearing with electric power and most recently reborn from 2024 as the AC Cobra GT Roadster and GT Coupe.

This collection gathers some of our favourite stories on both AC and the brilliant Shelby's other key projects, taken from the past 30 years of *Classic & Sports Car* (turn to p5 to find out when each first appeared), as a celebration of some of the world's most charismatic vehicles.

ALASTAIR CLEMENTS
Editor in chief, *Classic & Sports Car*

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36

66

6

Contents

AC CARS LTD

6 SPEED DEMON
The protracted revival of the speedster that set Brooklands records *July 2009*

12 A HERO'S RETURN
Back to Montlhéry in an Acedes wearing a record-breaker's bodywork *May 2016*

18 QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAINS
On the road in female motoring pioneer Betty Haig's rallying 16/80 *February 2014*

24 UNLIKELY SAVIOUR
Profits from the Petite three-wheeler helped keep AC afloat *November 2007*

28 THREE AGES OF BEAUTY
The gorgeous Ace came in AC-, Bristol- and Ford-engined forms *December 2003*

34 SOUTH AMERICAN DREAM
An Ace facelifted to reach the front in Venezuelan competition *November 2022*

42 TWO SEATS OR FOUR?
The Ace's coupé siblings, pretty Aceca and practical Greyhound *September 2016*

48 A LEGEND SPEAKS
Racer and Cobra creator Carroll Shelby on his life in the fast lane *February 2001*

52 BROTHERS IN ARMS
Choose your weapon: 289cu in Cobra or magnificent 427? *September 2012*

58 SNAKE CHARMERS
Meeting owners, racers and builders with a passion for the Cobra *November 2004*

66 YELLOW PERIL
Braving the famous 'Hairy Canary' 289 MkII, a Hawaiian racer reborn *April 2019*

74 THE ULTIMATE COBRA?
An exclusive blast in the sensational Shelby Daytona Coupe *September 2012*

80 SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY
A genuine Cobra faces up to MkIV revival and a pair of 'fake snakes' *October 2002*

86 A98: ROAD RACER
From 185mph on the M1 motorway to a disastrous run at Le Mans *September 2011*

92 AC'S MISSING LINK?
The unique MA 200 prototype could have been an Ace for the '70s *May 2025*

100 URBANE WARRIOR
The handsome 428 is an elegant GT with the soul of a Cobra *March 2008*

106 HOME-GROWN CONFECTION
AC 289 Sports: the final 'Cobra', which didn't wear the name *February 2022*

114 OPEN AND SHUT CASE
Roadster and coupé versions of the 428 head-to-head on the road *February 2017*

120 THOROUGHLY MODERN MIDDIE
AC's dramatic break with tradition, the V6 mid-engined 3000ME *March 2001*

126 MISSED OPPORTUNITY
With Ford's backing, the 'new Ace' could have been a contender *December 2003*

130 THE REINCARNATION GAME
Reborn Cobras: MkIV, Lightweight, CRS and Superblower convene *February 2022*

SHELBY VARIATIONS

140 PONY TALE
One man's lifelong love affair with his Shelby Mustang GT350 *March 2016*

146 MUSTANG ROYALTY
Tackling historic Spa-Francorchamps in a GT500 'King of the Road' *June 2021*

152 THE FIRST SUPERCAR
On the road in a MkI Ford GT40 for a pilgrimage to its birthplace *January 2017*

160 ROLL OF THUNDER
The Le Mans-winning GT40 meets its offspring – and imitators *October 2006*

168 HILL'S ANGEL
Flat-out in XGT-2, a Formula One hero's mighty 7-litre GT40 MkII *October 2010*

176 THE COBRA RELOADED?
Retrying the big V8 and British roadster recipe in the Sunbeam Tiger *August 2014*

182 BACK FOR GOOD
Lister's Sunbeam-based coupé returns to right its Le Mans wrongs *October 2014*

190 RALLYING ROOTES
Discovering why the Tiger lacked teeth out on the rally stage *November 2010*

KING OF THE

AC's racing pedigree started with Brooklands and heroic record attempts. This remarkable 1500cc, 16-valve speedster lives to tell the tale

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

HILL

When the pioneering motoring magnate and racing driver Selwyn Francis Edge fell out with Montague Napier, this Australian-born and very determined character turned to the fledgling AC marque over at Thames Ditton. Edge maintained that record-breaking was key to marketing, so, with Brooklands on the doorstep, the stage was set for a heroic feat in AC's early history.

When Edge took control of the firm in 1922, he instructed engineer John Weller and his team to develop one of its 200 Mile racers for an attempt to claim the first 100mph average over an hour in a 1500cc car. AC's advanced, razor-edged streamliners had always been quick, but they suffered poor reliability. Pioneering aviator Harry Hawker had already put AC in the record books with the first flying half-mile at 105mph in 1921, but his tragic death six weeks later in an air crash was a major loss. Motivated by Edge's new direction, Weller set about constructing a four-cylinder, twin-plug 1.5-litre motor, aided by development engineer and ace driver John Joyce. The short, narrow chassis brimmed with innovative features, including a transaxle gearbox and inboard brakes. With the slimline single-seater body, it looked like a wingless fuselage. Joyce pushed the car to the limit throughout 1922, yet every run was plagued by mechanical problems. Twice the two-bearing crankshaft failed, but once the engine had been sorted the narrow tyres often cried enough after prolonged high speeds. An ashen-faced Joyce regularly returned to the pits after yet another high-speed scare.

Rumours that Alvis was planning a rival run spurred on the AC crew and, with the added pressure that winter repairs at Brooklands would close the track by the end of November, Joyce repeatedly gave it his all. The car's remarkable 130mph maximum helped to drive the small team, but time and again tyres and breakages forced the AC to stop prematurely. For one final attempt – on the last possible day – a fresh 16-valve engine was prepared. After morning testing on Friday 22 November, Joyce climbed aboard on a cool, still afternoon. The crab-tracked, 55bhp lightweight machine flashed faultlessly around like clockwork for 60 minutes, with Joyce covering 101 miles and 696 yards in the allotted time to claim the Light Car Record at 101.39mph.

Joyce felt a firm bond with the AC record car, and it was developed for competition over the following three years. Extensive drilling of the chassis and components trimmed its weight to less than 9cwt – a shade over 1000lb – and, with the engine tuned to produce 77bhp, it set a blistering pace everywhere.

But AC's racing exploits were curtailed as it struggled to translate them into sales. Joyce's sprint car was eventually sold to a northern amateur competitor called Aked, who had some success with the demon machine. Its present custodian Roger Smith once met Aked's old mechanic at a Brooklands Society reunion. "He was in his 90s and vividly recalled testing the AC at Blackpool airport, where it clocked the ton while still running-in after an engine rebuild," recalls Roger. Then Aked lost interest after a dramatic accident at Southport Speed Trials. Story has it the front stub-axle broke and the car rolled over – the radiator still bears a dent from that crash on the beach course.

Aked's wife convinced him that it was time to give up motorsport, and the AC went into storage until the 1970s. "It's a miracle that the car was never pillaged for other Specials," Roger continues. The ageing Aked decided that the project, particularly the problematic porous cylinder head, was too challenging, and one day London dealer Dan Margulies was contacted about a dismantled AC. By chance

Robbie Hewitt answered the call, and she was intrigued enough to ring friend and Brooklands historian Bill Boddy.

"If you don't want it, I'll have it," was Boddy's response, which was enough to encourage Hewitt's purchase. With the help of her chum Denis Jenkinson, the car was rebuilt, but the motor thwarted progress. At some point a Riley engine was fitted while the AC was sorted.

Living locally to 'Jenks', it's no surprise that Roger was in awe of the respected *Motor Sport* reporter. He says: "I'd read about the AC, but first saw it at Jenks' house. He was pouring in water as quickly as it was coming out of the engine. I didn't say anything, but helped him to give it a push down the garden. Thankfully, it didn't start because the engine would probably have hydrauliced. When he lifted the bonnet, I was transfixed by this remarkable motor. Over a cup of tea we talked about vintage 1500cc engines. I argued for the Bugatti Brescia, but Jenks was adamant the AC was the best."

Hewitt and Jenks would later fall out, and the famous AC ended up on loan to the Bentley Motor Museum. But when Hewitt moved into a new house alongside the famous Phoenix pub and workshops in Hartley Wintney, the AC made a return.

With the car again nearby, Roger had the impetus to help Hewitt resuscitate the project. "Restoration techniques had moved on, and we agreed on a share if I could get it running," he recalls. "The only solution to the engine's problems was to remake the head. It was a real labour of love and took a long time to complete the patterns. The work was done by the late Eric Jones, an experienced 70-year-old who claimed that the 16-valve design was one of the most challenging jobs he'd done. Without Eric, we could never have done it. We didn't want to section the original, so we thought about the design for ages. Finally, in the mid-'90s, we were ready. Jim Harling cast it in bronze, which was difficult to pour due to the complexity of the tiny waterways. There's so little space and it took several attempts. Halfway through we also discovered a problem with the valve angle, which was disturbing the water jacket. There was only one option – to scrap it and start again." The wet-liner crankcase had suffered the same corrosion problem as the AC 'six', and the only choice was to cut the top and recast it.

Aiming to get the car completed in time for a French hillclimb at Guyon in 1999, Roger put all of his customer business aside and made a determined effort to finish the engine. He says: "We'd had little time to test and the jets were far too big. We used a gallon every five minutes, but with some soldering and car park trials, we had it going fine and made it up the hill. The project had really sidetracked me, so we lent it to the AC factory for display."

The Brooklands Centenary in 2007 brought the AC back out for selected events, where enthusiasts marvelled at its clever engineering and amazing degree of lightening. As an AC fan who once helped Jenks fettle this car at Prescott, I have long wanted to sample the grandaddy of the Thames Ditton family.

The AC has a lean, eager stance, from its narrow, Miller-esque radiator shroud to the tucked-up body that neatly wraps around the seats, along with a bolster fuel tank strapped over the back like a rucksack. The tank was reputedly from a Bristol Boxkite biplane and was given to Joyce's team by Harry Hawker. "It was missing when we took on the rebuild, but we found it in Hewitt's barn, as well as the original Delco Remy distributors," says Roger, as he primes the oil pump with a can.

Before switching on the ignition, the engine is churned over until the oil-pressure needle wakes: such precautions are essential with this precious motor. Once ready, the WW1 air pump

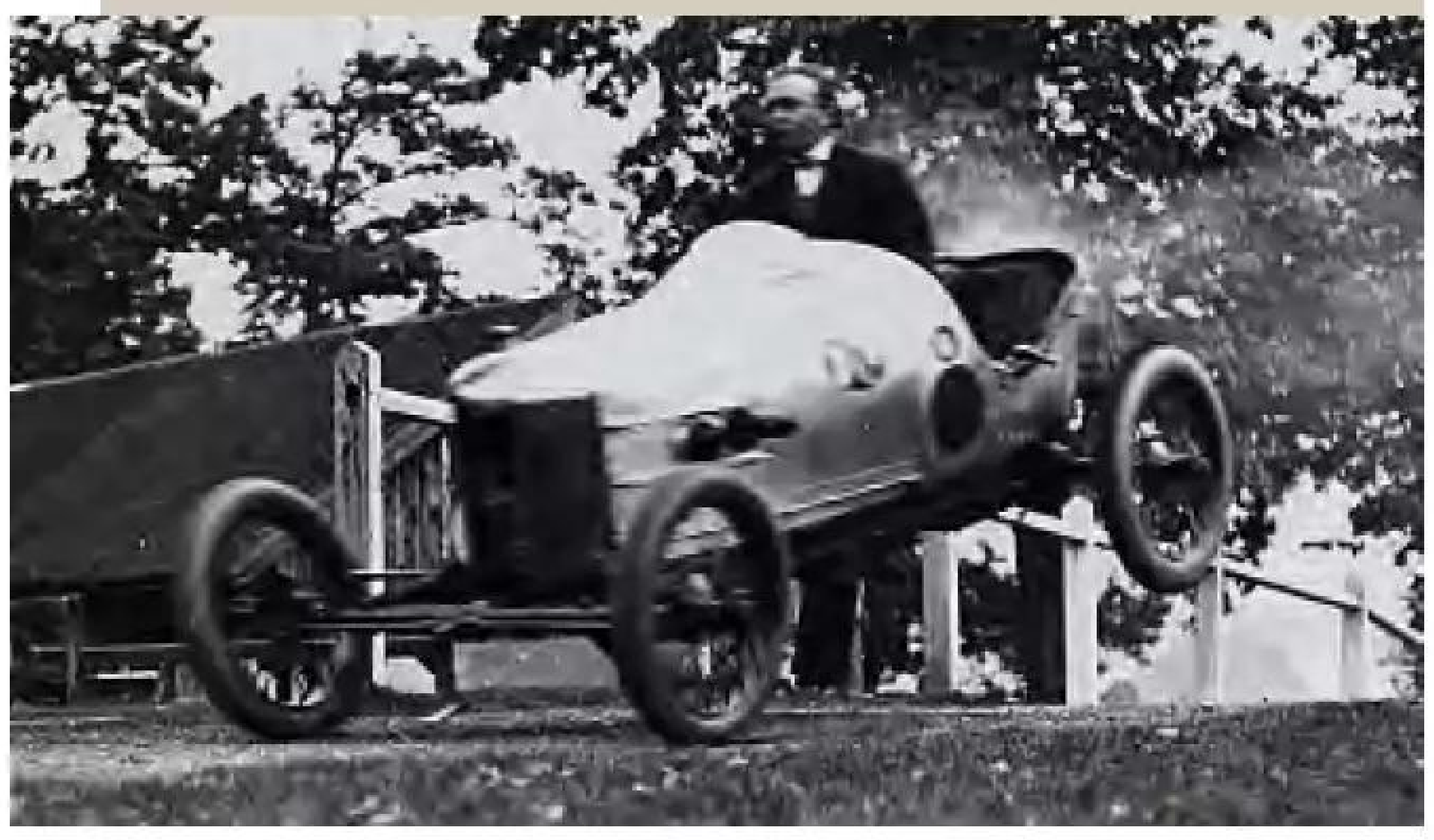
AC'S HIGH FLYER

As well as racing and record-breaking on the Outer Circuit, the efforts of John Joyce and the AC on Brooklands' Test Hill were legendary. Fitted with its current two-seater body, the little speedster shot up the 322ft incline to regularly land the fastest time.

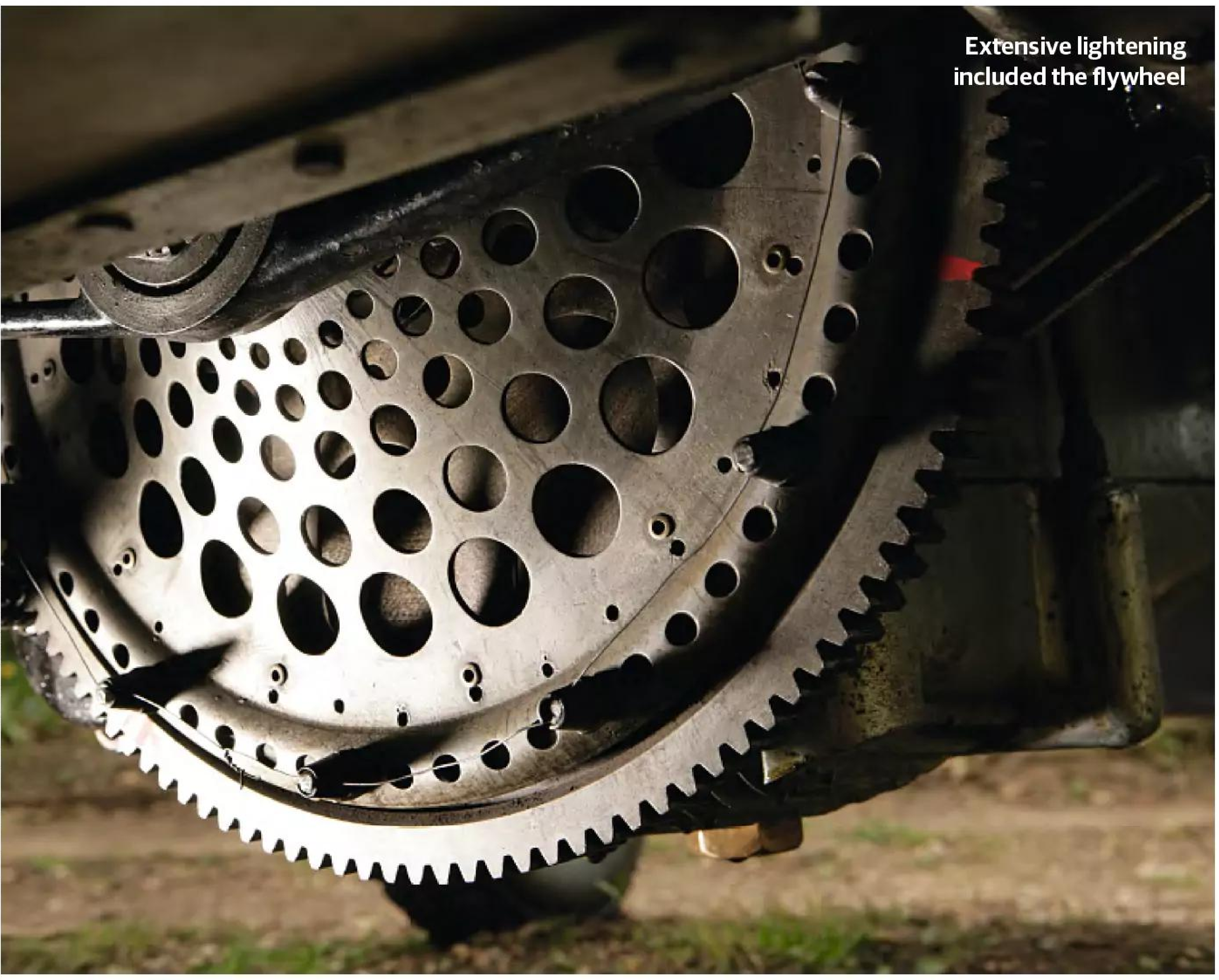
In a raging battle with Archie Frazer-Nash's GN Specials, Joyce claimed the record at 8.28 secs in November 1923, and again in 1925 (below) when he shaved it down to 7.87 secs from a standing start. With a 1-in-4 gradient over the final 50 yards, the top acted like a launch pad with cars flying 40ft.

The outright record was set on 25 October 1932 when RGJ Nash gunned his Frazer Nash Special 'The Terror' up in just 7.45 secs, averaging 32.4mph and clocking 50mph at the top. But the all-time best is held by Francis Beart at 6.99 secs on a 500cc JAP-powered Grindley Peerless speedway 'bike – he fell off on landing.

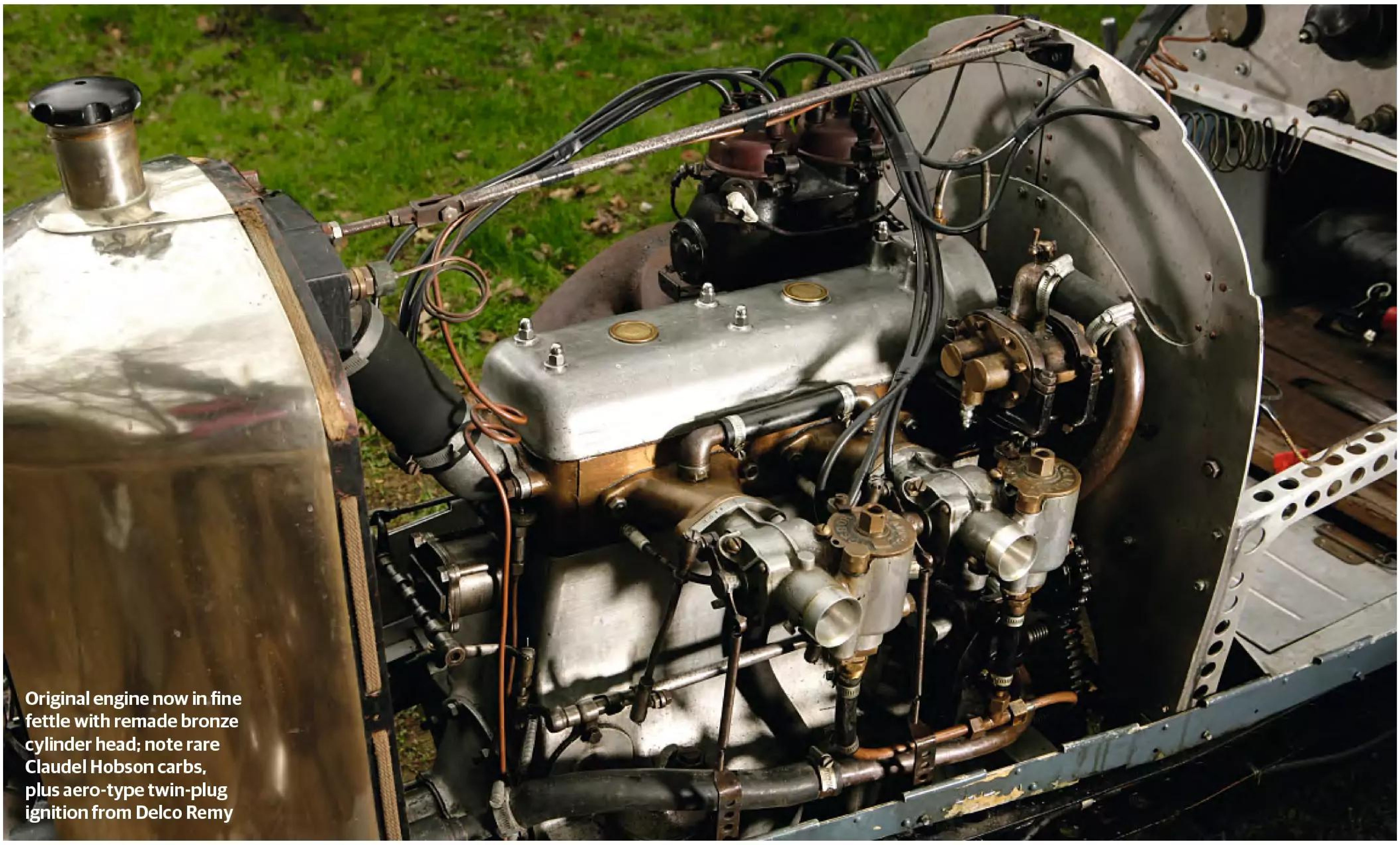
The Test Hill was opened on 25 March 1909 to encourage car makers to use the venue. The descent also was used for brake testing.



Above: Joyce (centre) and team fettle the AC record car in the Thames Ditton workshop. Below: Harry Hawker in one of the 200 Mile Race team cars



Extensive lightening included the flywheel



Original engine now in fine fettle with remade bronze cylinder head; note rare Claudel Hobson carbs, plus aero-type twin-plug ignition from Delco Remy

is worked to pressurise the fuel line. With the ignition retarded we hit the button – the car now has a self-starter – and those big, wedged, high-compression pistons start to work in the bores. Reluctant at first after a lengthy lay-up, the engine eventually fires. The lively top end, with little fingers working the 16 valves, is at odds with the earthy burble that erupts through the unsilenced outside exhaust.

Before the aluminium bonnet goes back on, we marvel at the running motor as the exposed chains at the rear whizz around working the water pump and magnetos. Then Roger generously signals for me to climb into the driver's seat. The fit is snug – like a handmade shoe – with the three-spoke steering wheel angled high and close to your chest. For such a short-looking car the cockpit is surprisingly comfortable, with ample space to heel-and-toe. The centre throttle is a little roller lever that hooks around the steering column, while the flat brake and clutch pedals – like much of the car – are extensively drilled.

I slot the externally mounted gearlever into first while eagerly watching the gauges for water temperature, oil and fuel pressure. The four-speed gate has first out and forwards. Once you get used to the sharp, short action of the clutch, and as soon as it's rolling, the gearchange working the innovative transaxle is Bugatti-like in the slickness of its operation. There's a big gap between second and third, so you need to keep the revs up, but the gears slice through at higher speeds without using the clutch. "It's like a bevel 'box, but without the chains," says Roger. Mate it to the torquey 'four', and the AC's performance is easy to appreciate. This busy engine loves to rev and the whole car begs to go. "It makes a Bugatti Brescia feel sluggish," claims Roger, and a few runs around the hilly local roads quickly confirm his bold comparison. The steering is light and super-direct, but you need to adjust to the handling. The mixture of the crab track and locked rear end makes the chassis skittish – particularly as you lift off into a corner – but power through the apex and the AC is sharp and nimble.

With only inboard rear brakes and narrow linings, the stopping power is limited, but the car feels brilliantly poised – not least because of the minimal unsprung weight. On loose courses in the 1920s it must have been a demon charger, as Joyce proved at Boulogne Speed Week in 1924. He dominated his class over two hillclimb courses and was beaten only by a pair of bigger cars: Parry-Thomas' 7-litre Leyland and Coe's 4-litre Vauxhall.

Buzzing along our rural route in this flyweight toolroom speedster, I still can't imagine flashing around Brooklands at above the ton for a seemingly endless hour. Over the Weybridge bumps, the compact 16-valver must have regularly been airborne, and it would have taken guts to hold such an average for an hour. Roger reckons that the gearbox stripped a cog during one flat-out high-speed attempt. If its brilliant driver had disengaged the engine, the AC would probably have flown over the banking, but thankfully Joyce let it grind to a halt, destroying the differential crownwheel yet undoubtedly saving his skin and the car. No question: the drivers of these small-bore machines were just as brave as those in the leviathan racers. Small wonder you always see them in pit photos having a well-earned smoke and a glass of whisky after a fast run.

Below, from top: Joyce raises the dust at Shelsley Walsh in July 1924; bolster petrol tank from a Bristol Boxkite; exposed transaxle/diff unit with inboard brakes

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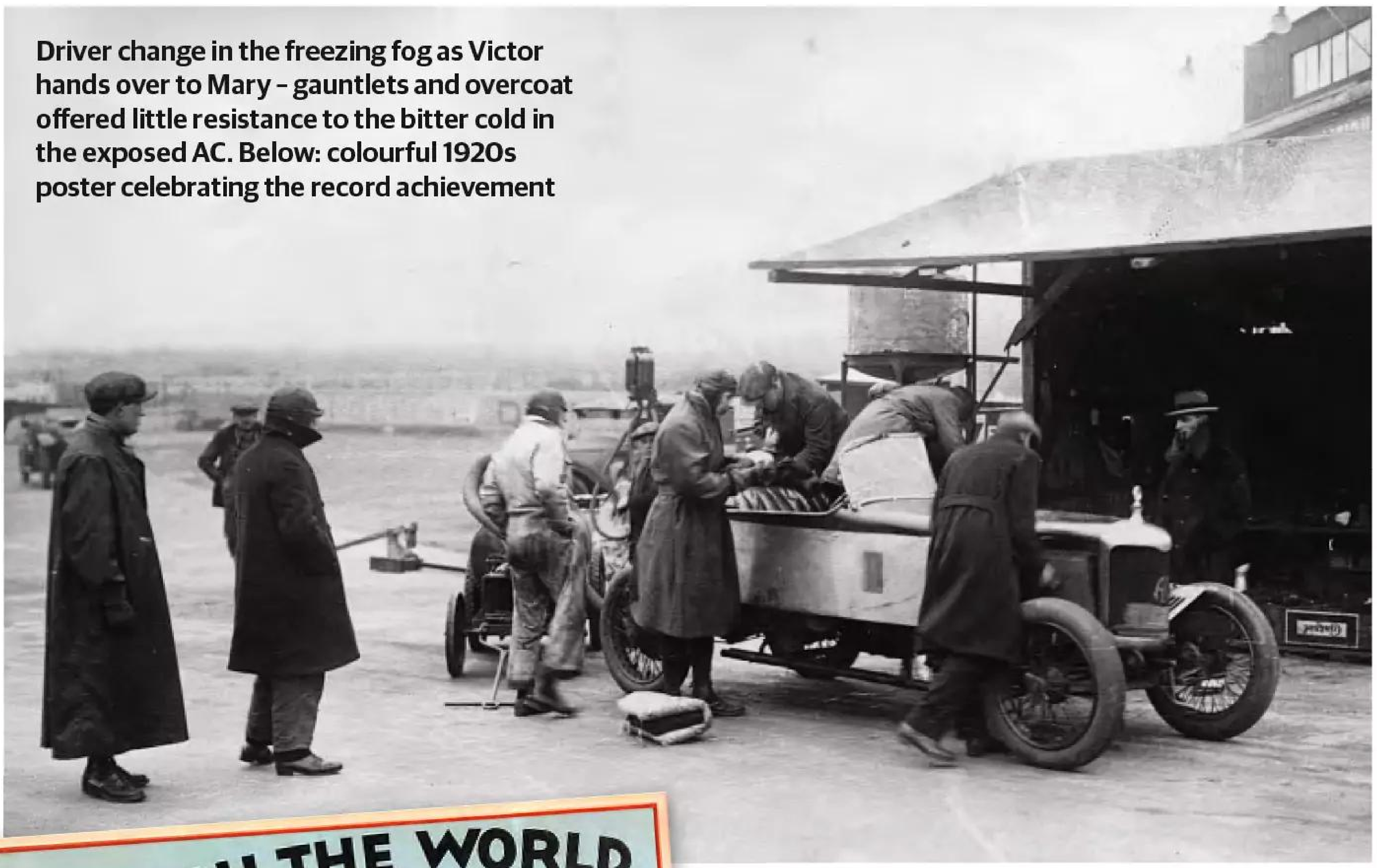
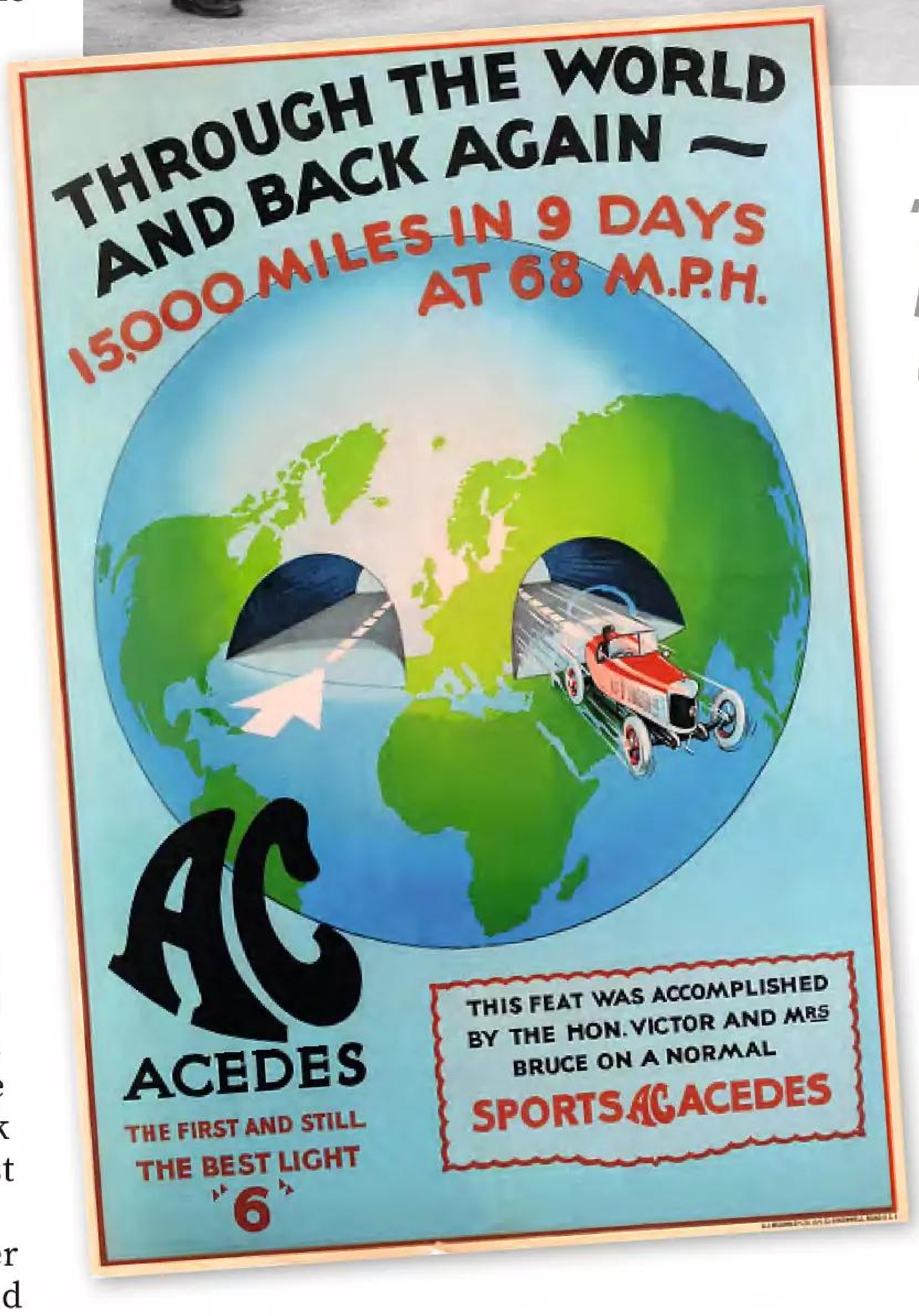
Going the DISTANCE

Montlhéry played host to an emotional AC rerun to toast the Honourable Victor and Mary Bruce, who battled through appalling conditions to break a raft of records in 1927

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **MICK WALSH/SERGE CORDEY** ARCHIVE **WENDY GRIMMOND**



Driver change in the freezing fog as Victor hands over to Mary – gauntlets and overcoat offered little resistance to the bitter cold in the exposed AC. Below: colourful 1920s poster celebrating the record achievement


THROUGH THE WORLD AND BACK AGAIN ~
15,000 MILES IN 9 DAYS AT 68 M.P.H.
AC
ACEDES
THE FIRST AND STILL THE BEST LIGHT "6"
THIS FEAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY THE HON. VICTOR AND MRS BRUCE ON A NORMAL
SPORTS AC ACEDES

Endurance is not the most glamorous of the motoring disciplines and has, from a publicity point of view, now switched to secret development with camouflaged vehicles at remote locations. But long-distance runs were headline news in the 1920s, particularly if they involved a woman driver. One of the most remarkable attempts was by the Hon Victor and Mrs Mary Bruce with their AC Acedes Six at Montlhéry in 1927. The Bruces were popular figures in the motoring world, and although Brooklands was on the doorstep of the Thames Ditton marque, the team was forced to use the tight, banked track south of Paris because night driving was not permitted at their local venue. Cheaper fees also meant that the record run had to be staged during the winter.

After Rallye Monte-Carlo success and epic journeys to north Africa, the publicity-hungry Mary Petre Bruce was looking for a new goal. A report that a Chrysler team in America had covered 10,000 miles at 60mph in 1927 inspired the couple to approach SF Edge – the director of AC and a well-known record man with Napier at Brooklands in 1907 – about a European challenge with the impressive Six. AC was struggling financially in the late 1920s, like many smaller manufacturers, but Edge agreed to provide a tuned car and a team of mechanics if the Bruces paid the £250 track fees and other costs. Victor's trustees refused to release the money for the risky quest, but the ever-persuasive Mary eventually talked her Aunt Maud into donating funds for the project.

In early December the record car and support vehicle were driven to France; Edge and chief designer Sydney Smith joined the group of six mechanics. Despite its taller axle and tuned engine, with wings and lights removed for streamlining, the AC was no trick Special. The party stayed at the Château de Montlhéry, which had been a second home for teams since Alexandre Lamblin's track opened in 1924. There the Bruces could rest between their alternate three-hour stints.

The conditions were grim as the 8 December start day approached, with dense fog and freezing temperatures, but the hardy couple refused to postpone the booking. Both partners had driven a road car at Montlhéry, but tests at higher speeds in the record machine proved very unsettling. Mary said that the compact, 1¼-mile circuit felt like "a wall of death", with both drivers dizzy and sick after short runs.

Despite the poor weather, Mary valiantly set out at 7pm. With no lights on the car, her route was marked by Hurricane oil lamps set four yards apart around the perimeter. After three hours, she overshot the pits (the front brakes had been removed for lightness), and had to do an extra lap before Victor took over. As the week progressed, one slept while the other drove, and sessions were extended to six hours to allow for more rest. Temperatures dropped and frostbite became a worry: a doctor advised massaging warm oil into their fingers.

It is hard to imagine the monotony of the endless circuits, day and night, plus the ice building up around the 'screen, which forced the pair to look over the top into the biting airflow; Mary made up a visor from celluloid. By the sixth day they had passed the 10,000-mile record, but fatigue was taking its toll. The track liquidators (it went bust during the attempt) demanded extra fees, to which Mary retorted that she would "drive through the barriers" if they tried to stop the AC after so long.

Disaster struck on the seventh night, when Victor lost control at 95mph on black ice and the AC skidded luridly before rolling into the muddy infield. The car was lifted back on to its wheels by spectators and Victor scrambled clear, but the task of returning it to the pits was down to the drivers alone. Victor woke Mary, and the two pushed the smashed AC the half mile to the waiting crew. Twelve hours were lost during repairs, including to the steering, while an aeroscreen was fabricated using the numberplate. JA Joyce, an experienced AC racer and development driver, flew out to help make up lost time, although he initially struggled with the severe cold. To make matters worse, Smith caught pneumonia but kept working until he collapsed.

> *'Blizzards moved in, but the AC roared on as the snowdrifts built up around it'*

The trio plugged on at higher speeds because the average had dropped to 65mph, with Victor refusing to shorten his shifts despite the scary accident. The forecast looked bleak on the final day, with blizzards moving in. With two hours to go, the white stuff arrived in force, but Mary requested to take the final laps and the AC roared on as snowdrifts built up around it. As the last 10 circuits were signalled from the pits, the growing number of spectators cheered her on.

The press had followed proceedings, mostly because there was a lady driver involved, and quite a crowd including a news film crew turned out to report on the historic finish. After breaking 17 records, at an average of 68mph for 15,000 miles, the relieved team was too exhausted to celebrate. Mary was the focus of the media interest, while her reserved husband and Joyce were almost forgotten as the car was inundated with bouquets. Drama continued back at the hotel when a mechanic fell asleep while smoking, and guests were woken with screams of a fire alert.

The car returned to Thames Ditton and AC's marketing men commissioned a victory poster with the slogan: 'Through the world and back again.' The Automobile Club de France was equally impressed, and presented a special gold plaque to the brave couple.

The original Montlhéry record car was sold to AJ Mollart, a toolroom manager at AC, who trialled it extensively throughout 1928 before the body was removed for a lighter, fabric design in readiness for the Brooklands Double

A MARINE WITH A YEN FOR ADVENTURE

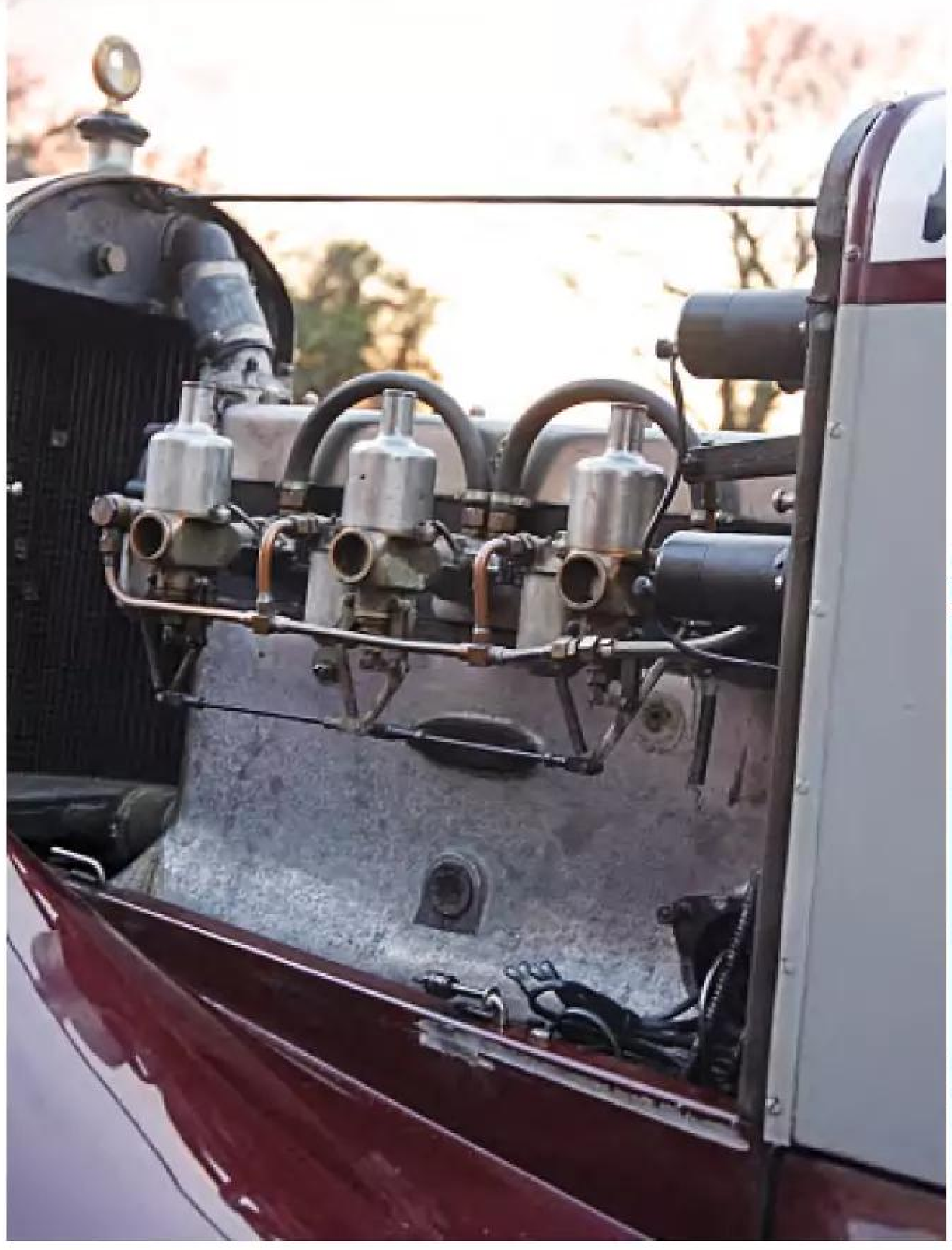
Born in 1897, the third son of Baron Aberdare, the Hon Victor Austin Bruce served with the Royal Marines in WW1 and, like many wealthy young chaps, was then drawn to the motor industry. An approach to AC led to Bruce representing the firm at events. A regular Gold Medal winner in MCC trials, he also raced the first Aston Martin, 'Coal Scuttle'.

Bruce was involved with various publicity stunts for AC, including driving up Snowdon, which he conquered in 1 hour 50 minutes despite a puncture on the ascent.

He made headlines on the Rallye Monte-Carlo, taking outright victory in 1926 despite breaking a crownwheel before the final test. Immediately after, Bruce married Mildred Mary Petre against family wishes. His wife co-drove on the '27 Monte, after which they headed via Italy to Algeria and Morocco on a 9000-mile jaunt. Other highlights included a Jowett trial at Montlhéry with a fuel bowser in tow that enabled a non-stop 72-hour drive.

Bruce's relationship with Mary broke down during the '30s, but they didn't divorce until 1941 because the title was key for promotion and sponsorship. Bruce (below) continued with engineering projects and, after WW2, developed an electric-car conversion with Silent Travel. He died aged 81 in 1978.

Quite a crowd turned out for the finish, and Mary Bruce was deluged with flowers after the valiant drive



Left: impressive AC 'six' with triple SUs. Below: the actual body used for the record run – a pricey Montlhéry Sports model was offered, but only three were produced in the end

Twelve. The old coachwork was sold to Ray Morley, a keen young enthusiast who fitted it to his newly acquired Six, PH 8013, which featured a tuned triple-carburettor engine and sported wire wheels. It continued to collect an outstanding number of awards, including on the first RAC Rally in 1932.

Morley subsequently traded PH 8013 back to the factory for £25 against an ex-works 16/80. The 10-year-old, much-campaigned vintage Six was occasionally used by William Hurlock's son, Derek (the Hurlocks had saved AC in 1930), for trips out to their country residence at Glevering Hall near Woodbridge. The long driveway became a test track for various machines, including an Austin Seven Special owned by Hurlock's chum, Ian Girling. His desire for something more usable prompted Hurlock to sell him the Six for £33, and it was a regular sight storming along coastal roads including trips to St John 'Jock' Horsfall's workshop at Cliff House, Dunwich.

At the age of 95, Girling recounted some fond memories of the spartan AC: "It was great fun and, with encouragement from Jock, I fabricated aeroscreens, a cutaway door and a racy outside exhaust for it.

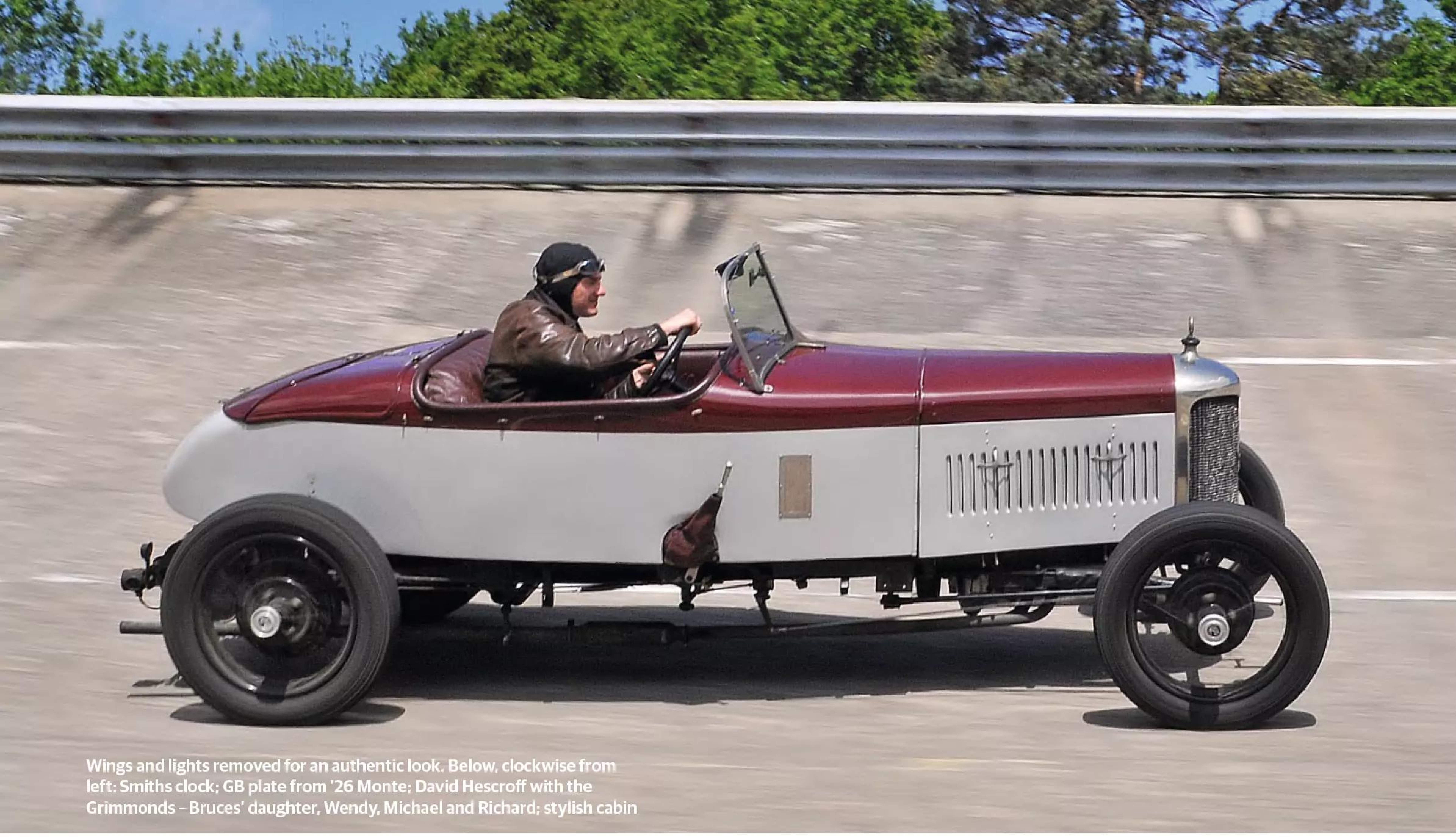
"I loved the heat from the pipes in the winter, and on runs back from late sessions working on Jock's Astons." Girling also started courting his future wife in the AC. He said: "She was only 17 when we met, and her mother was nervous about letting her go out in it. We used it to attend dances at the Crown Hotel in Ipswich and the Spa Pavilion, Felixstowe. It was quite a struggle for her to get aboard when she was wearing an evening dress, and I always loaned her my old riding mac to keep warm. Jock helped me to tune the AC and was a regular passenger for trips out to local car clubs and pubs. We fitted larger brakes and moved the handbrake to outside the body. The steering wheel once dropped into my lap when the scuttle timber collapsed, and the remade, engine-turned dashboard featured lots of extra dials picked up in the Air Force. I became very attached to the AC, but it had to go after three years to help finance a new family home."

The AC, by then with cycle wings, was sold to Lt Col Michael Dracopoli, who, like Bruce, was a member of the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (or 'The Buffs'). He used it regularly when he was stationed in Suffolk and later Kent. While Dracopoli was posted overseas, PH 8013 was stored in Ipswich until David Hales acquired it and began the process of returning the car to Montlhéry specification. Hescroff, a respected historian, tracked down key figures from the car's history, including Bruce and Mollart, who provided vivid recollections and photos to aid the restoration.

Passionate AC aficionado David acquired PH 8013 in a partly dismantled state in 1980. "I'd first met Ray [Morley] at Prescott in 1979," he remembers, "and we talked about finding his old car. No wings were fitted when it arrived, and we got it going for a run around the lanes. It looked just like the record car."

Rod Jolley was enlisted to make new wings and sort the original bodywork, and the restoration was finished in time for the RAC Golden 50, with Morley co-driving. "Donald Healey was watching, but Ray was the only entrant who had done the first RAC," continues David. "It was so frustrating when the back axle failed on the first day."

David believes in using his ACs, and PH 8013, now nicknamed 'Monte', is no different. As well as a few Vintage Sports-Car Club trials – "it's pretty hopeless because the seating is too far forward" – he has raced it at Silverstone and



Wings and lights removed for an authentic look. Below, clockwise from left: Smiths clock; GB plate from '26 Monte; David Hescroff with the Grimmonds – Bruces' daughter, Wendy, Michael and Richard; stylish cabin

AC CARS LTD THAMES DITTON ENG
CAR No 14238

ALEY
ASTON-MARTIN

Zandvoort: "It still has the low gearing (4.5:1) fitted for trialling, but it's really torquey and will pull from 8mph in top. It weights only 16cwt and, with triple carbs plus 7.5:1 pistons, it'll cruise happily at 60mph once you're through the vibration period of the four-bearing motor. I've briefly seen 80mph on track – that made me think hard about the achievements of the Bruces. The steering is heavy, the brakes keep you focused and the handling is progressive, but the engine is its greatest feature."

David had long wanted to take the car back to Montlhéry to mark the record drive. That plan was reawakened after a chance meeting with Wendy Grimmond (Victor Bruce's daughter from his second marriage) at the Ferry Works AC centenary gathering in August 2011.

Wendy had a wealth of evocative material from her father's pre-war times, but he had talked little about his motoring years with his first wife and focused on his new family. The AC celebration, and enquiries from American author Nancy Wilson, prompted Wendy to investigate those early days. Bruce fastidiously kept diaries all his life, as well as scrapbooks of his extensive AC escapades – but sadly not the gruelling 1927 runs. Wendy also discovered the maps from his trips to North Africa, rally medals, extensive cuttings and a stack of photos all carefully packed and preserved.

David subsequently became good friends with the Grimmond family, and a trip to the biennial Vintage Revival at Montlhéry in 2015 offered the perfect opportunity to run Monte around the famous banked circuit. In the weeks running up to the trip, the Acedes was taken up to the Grimmonds' home workshop. Wendy's husband Richard and son Michael – both highly experienced with classic Jaguars (Richard worked at Coombs Garage) – set about preparing the AC and transforming it to restore at least some of its record-setting look. This included removing both the heavy mudguards and the headlights.

It was an emotional moment for all present when Wendy and Michael climbed into Monte and headed out of the Montlhéry paddock to the pits. The hot sunny morning couldn't have contrasted more with that desperately cold week in December 1927. The direction was opposite to the Bruces' anti-clockwise record run, but just waiting in the pitlane for the green light graphically conjured those hasty stops for fuel and driver changes at the icy, fog-bound circuit. It would have been fantastic to line the track with lanterns for a lap at twilight, but unfortunately the venue had to be cleared by 5pm. Yet even in the dazzling sunlight we could sense the history of this preserved autodrome, along with the ghosts of its past.

The banking is very bumpy and chicanes now limit the speed for demonstration runs, but the Grimmonds returned safely after three spirited laps that even included a dice with another vintage AC. Michael was buzzing – the shortfall of grip from the old Dunlop tyres allowed him to slide Monte through the tight bends. The Grimmonds were besotted with the vintage AC and immediately began talking about other trips, including a reunion with former owner Ian in Suffolk.

An even more ambitious plan had yet to be hatched (see panel, right), but their eagerness proved unstoppable. Wendy created a special tribute to her late father in the Brooklands Museum: a case packed with fascinating memorabilia that brilliantly highlights his amazing motoring life.

The original chassis of the Acedes record car survived until the '50s, when Lancia enthusiast John Vessey turned it into a Special, although sadly this creation vanished following the introduction of the MoT test in 1960 – it was probably scrapped. But the spirit of that car, including the original body, continues with PH 8013. And there's no better way to celebrate such valiant motorists than reruns on the very tracks where they made history.

JOHN O'GROATS HOTEL
PE 7799

LANDS END
ORKNEY
SHETLAND
PH 8013

MONTE-CARLO OR BUST

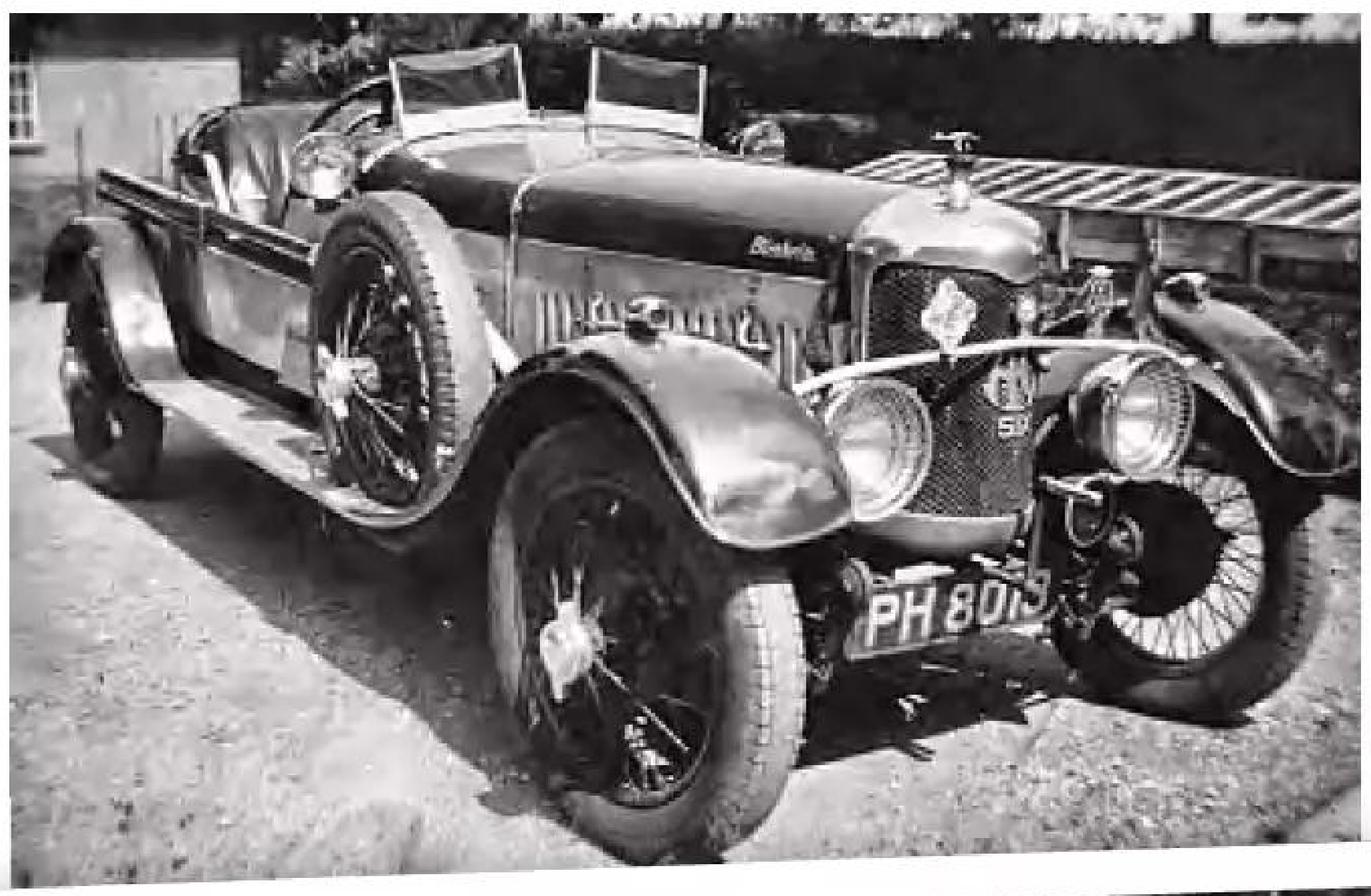
Six months after returning the Acedes to Montlhéry, David Hescroff spotted a request from the Automobile Club de Monaco for a vintage AC to enter the Rallye Monte-Carlo Historique to celebrate the first-ever start from John O'Groats (above left). Victor Bruce, a class winner with an AC in 1925, requested the remote Scottish start venue for 1926 and went on through arduous conditions to claim the inaugural outright British win on the famous event. David contacted the Grimmonds, who were equally enthusiastic about the 90th-anniversary rerun, while Bruce's grandson Michael and David's nephew Robert (above right, on right) took on the driving duties for the long trip south.

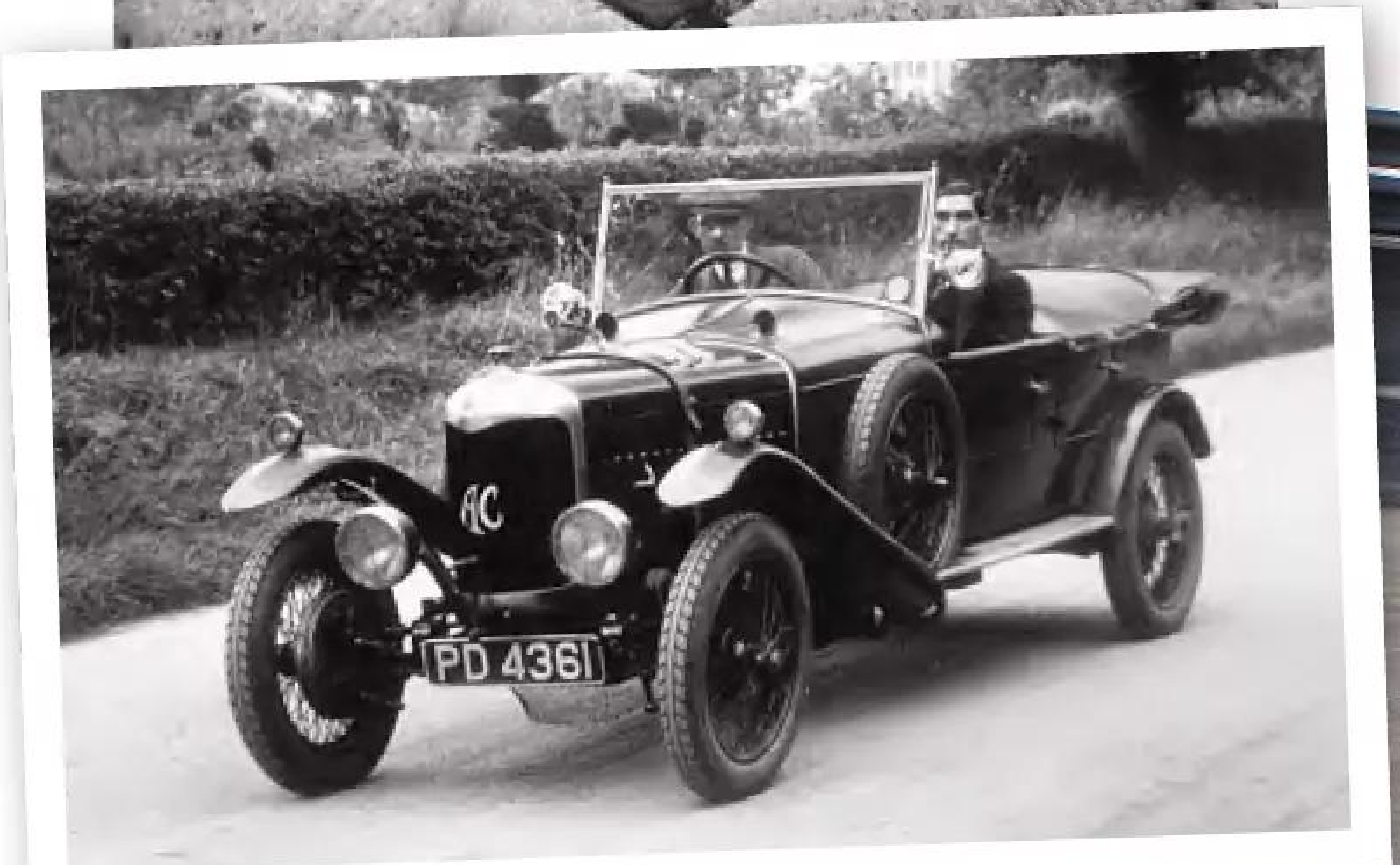
Just five pre-war cars competed, but the only snow they encountered was across the Highlands. A cancelled Zeebrugge crossing from Hull, forcing a detour to Dover, and an M25 bridge closure failed to deter the pair. "The AC cruised happily at 60mph and regularly passed lorries," enthuses Wendy.

The determined crew progressed, despite long delays, across France through relentless rain and dense, freezing fog – although they refused to raise the hood. Magneto problems eventually halted the pace, but they were back on the road with the help of the Blue Diamond Riley équipe: Wendy adds: "We made up a 'Frankenstein' mag from a spare, but it never ran smoothly. Working the advance/retard control while steering felt like playing a violin, and the backfiring through tunnels was dramatic."

Finally, on day four – after yet another pre-dawn start – the AC team spotted the twinkling lights of Monaco ahead and the Mediterranean as they popped and banged down the streets to the finish. "Had we needed a trailer, even at the last stage, I'd have turned back," says Wendy. "We had to make it under our own power as a tribute to grandad's achievement. I couldn't help thinking about him all the way down."

After clocking up 1568 miles over four days, they celebrated with Champagne generously bought by the Riley crew and all toasted the Hon Victor Bruce. A neat touch was the weather-worn GB plate on the back, the actual one that Bruce fitted to his AC. The winning 1926 car may be long lost, but its spirit continues with these passionate enthusiasts. What next? A trip to Morocco or the Arctic Circle?





Richard pushes on up the steep banking, against the sunlight. Above, from top: first body on PH 8013 – note the outside exhaust; original record car with lighter fabric body for the Double Twelve

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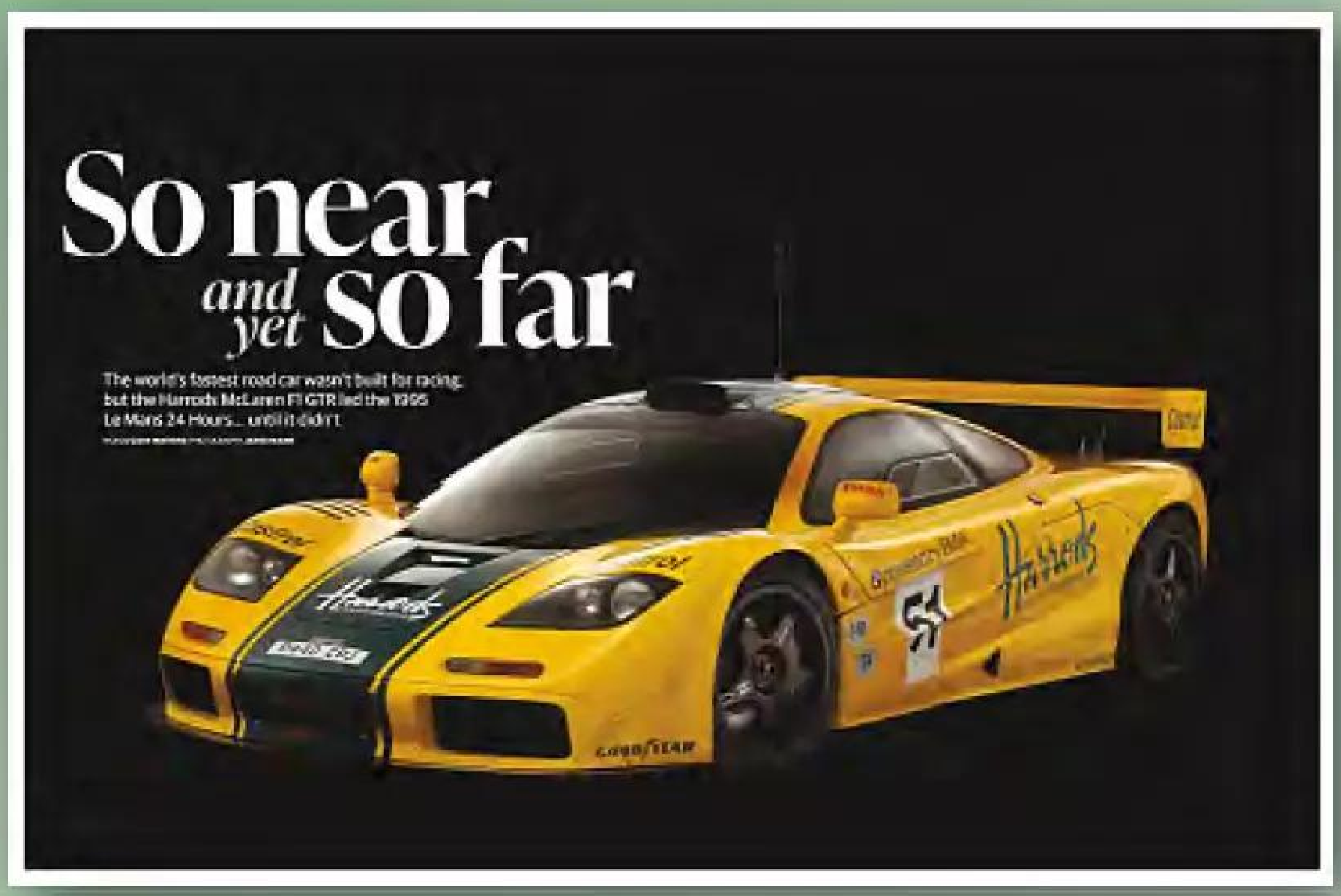
So near and yet so far

All American halo

Don't make me laugh…

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MARCH HARE

Not many cars served as a wartime farm vehicle before being entered into the Alpine Rally, but this very special AC 16/80 did just that

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

It's July 1946, and determined rally enthusiast Betty Haig is already packing her AC 16/80 for the trip to Annecy to compete in the Alpine Trial. Europe is still rebuilding following the Second World War, so, as well as preparing the 10-year-old sports car, which had worked hard during the war transporting six fruit harvests, Haig had the task at short notice of sorting European petrol coupons, currency, up-to-date maps and finding a female navigator to qualify for the Ladies' Cup. Before arriving at the start, there was the obstacle of destroyed bridges across France and long detours *en route*.

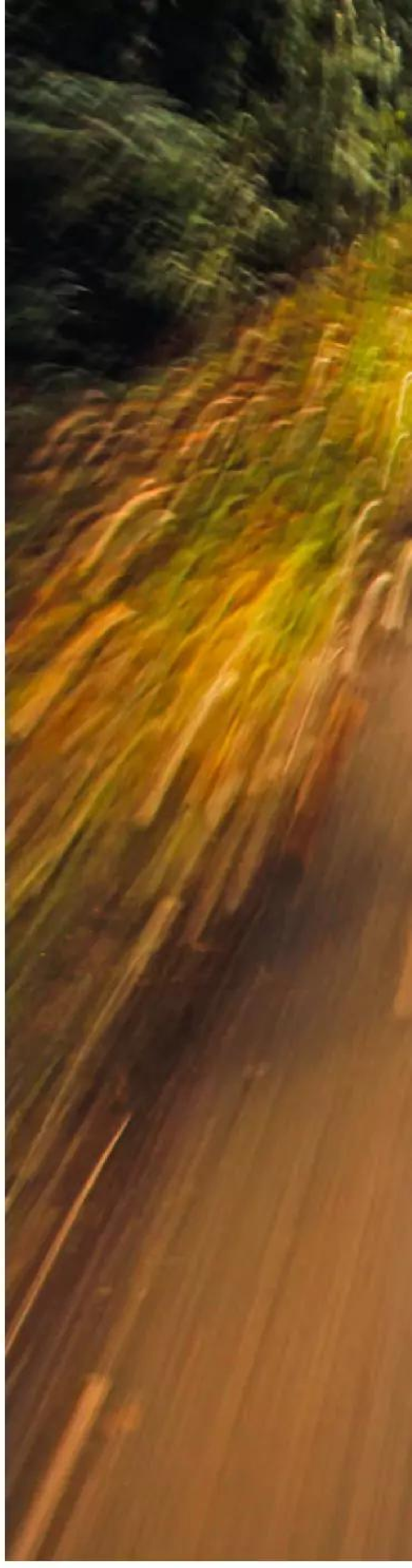
'The AC caused quite a stir at the weigh-in as it was the first British car to compete after the war,' wrote Haig in her diary. 'As other competitors arrived, we had a great reunion with our continental friends after the war years.'

Following the first day of speed trials, during which the AC suffered with the 'appallingly bad French petrol', Haig and navigator Enid Riddell set out to conquer the six high cols over a non-stop route: 'Just 19 of the 37 starters clocked in that night. The course was severe, and the condition of the roads hard to imagine. All the bridges were down, and we crawled over deep ravines on nothing more than a few wobbling planks. Many of the mountain roads had subsided into the valleys below, and most villages were in ruins with the inhabitants living among the rocks in primitive conditions.'

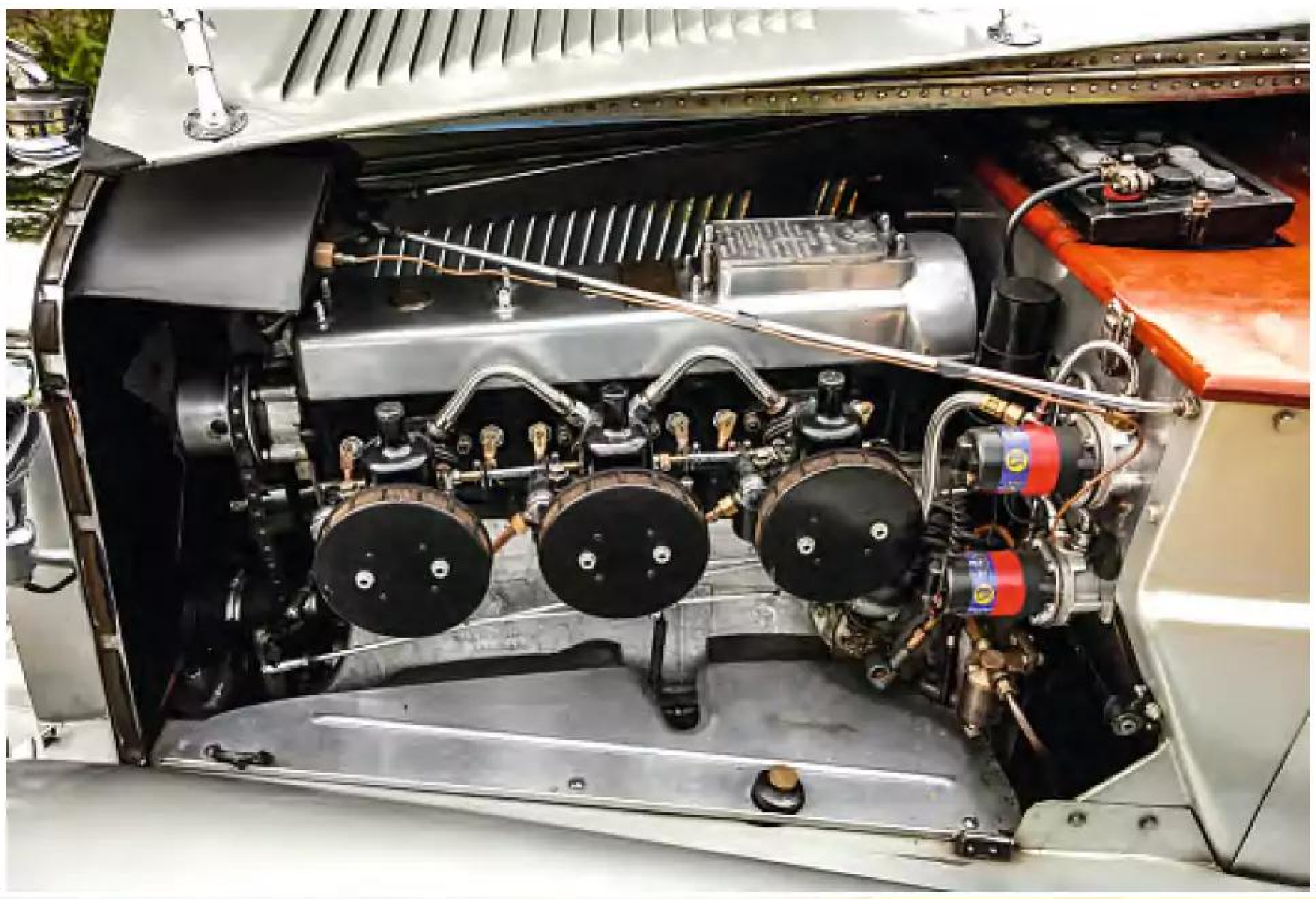
The AC rallied on through the intense summer heat, the coolant boiling and forcing stops to refill from streams, while Haig worried about the old, retreaded tyres she had no option but to use: 'The final stage over the famous Col du Galibier was the toughest section, with deep snow still covering the high passes. The road was in a terrible state and everyone was having tyre troubles.'

Slowly, all of Haig's key rivals – including a very fast, ex-Le Mans Darl'mat Peugeot – expired. Driving into the low sun and heading towards the Marseille finish while trying to see through the dust-covered windscreen, Haig sensed victory: 'Then came the unkind cut. A sudden rally sign directed us up a narrow road into wild Mediterranean foothills. For mile after mile, the rough narrow tracks seemed to shake the last ounce of life out of the exhausted cars and drivers.'

Haig made the finish and passed the final test, with the tough AC greatly impressing the organisers and rivals: 'All the components and electrical equipment were working 100%. The only breakage was a front tie-bar carrying the numberplate and spotlamp.' Haig collected a trio of trophies, including the 2-litre class victory and the Coupe des Dames. Among the telegrams of congratulations was one from the Hurlocks, the owners of AC Cars. Soon after her return home that summer, the trusty AC was hillclimbed a few times. Haig removed the chrome radiator slats to improve cooling,



Clockwise from right: lovely view down the long bonnet with greyhound mascot and open road; great profile with hood neatly stowed away; quick-release fuel cap; long-serving AC 'six' with triple SU carbs; wonderful white knob on gearlever



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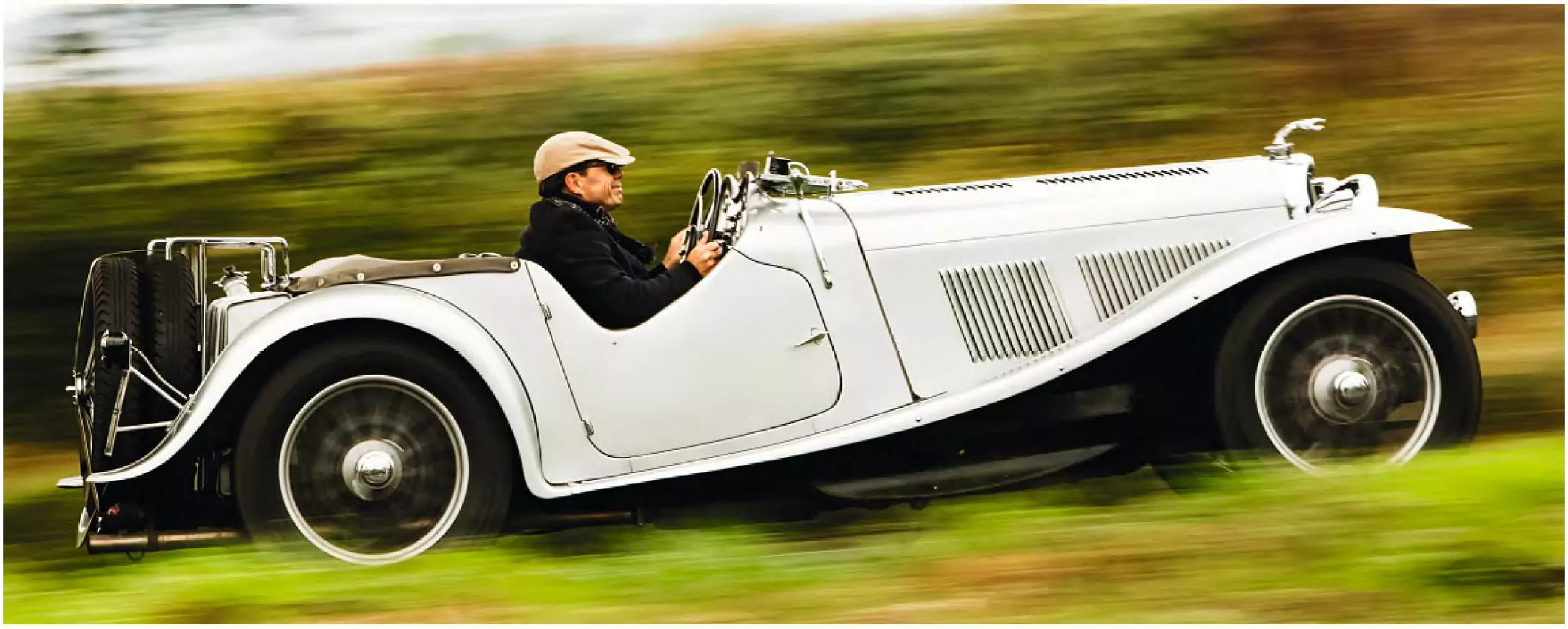


'Slowly, Haig's key rivals expired and she collected a trio of trophies'

AC 16/80

Sold/number built 1937-'39/42 (28 slab-tanks)
Construction steel ladder chassis, handmade aluminium body over wooden frame
Engine all-alloy, sohc 1991cc straight-six, three 1⅛in SU carburettors
Max power 80bhp @ 4000rpm
Max torque n/a
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front beam axle, Hartford friction dampers **rear** live axle, friction dampers; semi-elliptic springs f/r
Steering Bishop cam-type
Brakes Bendix cable-operated drums
Length 12ft 9in (3886mm) **Width** 5ft (1524mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1321mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 10in (2692mm)
Weight 2239lb (1016kg)
0-60mph 18 secs
Top speed 90mph **Mpg** n/a
Price new £445

but eventually it was sold and a BMW 328 – acquired prior to WW2, but which she had since been too embarrassed to drive – was disinterred for competition.

Today, that very 16/80 is in superb fettle, and it is now the pride of lifelong AC enthusiast David Hescroff, whose passion for the marque started with his father's pre-war two-seater drophead. "My brother John and I used to travel in the dickey seat, which was great fun," he recalls. "I'll never forget one drive across the New Forest when we arrived too fast at a humpback bridge. Both our school caps came off. When Dad sold the car in 1949 I was only eight, and I remember crying my eyes out."

As soon as David had passed his driving test, the only vehicle he wanted was an AC. He recalls: "I found a four-seater drophead that I ran for six months, but I sold it on because it needed too much work."

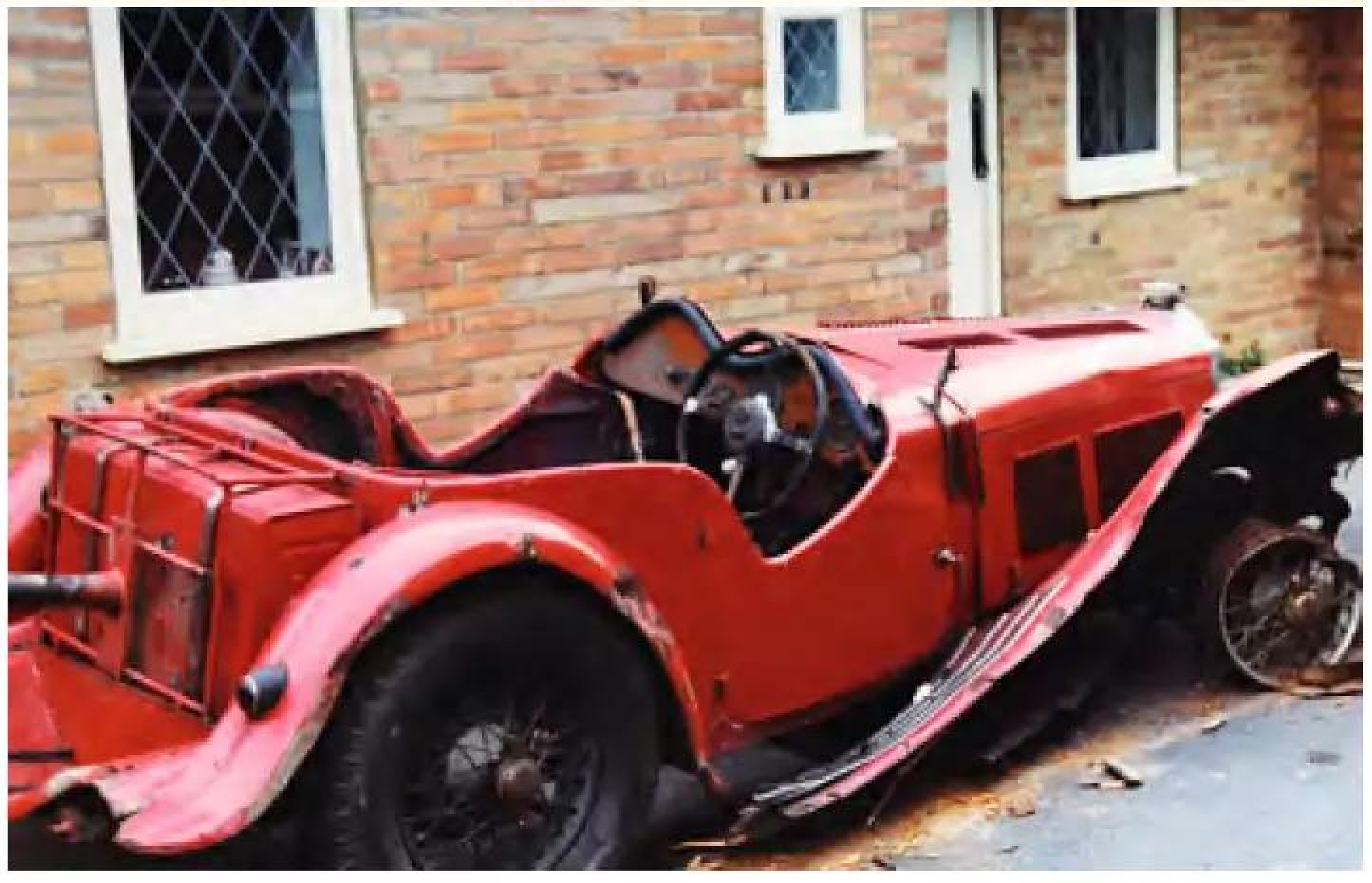
After a succession of Triumph TR6s, his interest in ACs was revived in the early 1970s by rumours of a supercharged two-seater in the Dorset area: "I eventually found the owner but he'd just sold it. Then I started to look into the history of the pre-war cars and really fancied one of the slab-tank models. Somehow they looked more sporty than the sloping-tail cars. I went up to the factory at Thames Ditton, and, after looking through the 'bible' of build records, I discovered just how few were built: only 28 slab-tanks and 14 sloping tails, which was nothing compared with main rival Jaguar."

After joining the AC Owners' Club, David read about Haig's exploits. "The stories of her adventures on the 1946 Alpine Rally fascinated me," he continues. "The car hadn't been seen for years, and I tracked it down to 'Bunny' Burnett in Cheddar. The good news was that he agreed to sell, but it was in a sad state. As a student in the '60s, Bunny had been involved in a head-on accident and the AC, although complete, hadn't been touched since. At some point the body had been painted red, and the chassis was bent in the heavy shunt."

David couldn't resist the daunting project, and he instructed trusted specialist Phil Whitaker with the rebuild. Following a total strip-down, EPJ 101 started to come together, including a respray in its original silver hue.

After learning that Haig was still alive but by then in her 70s, David became extra-motivated to get the car finished for a visit to her home. He says: "It seemed appropriate that our first trip should be to see Betty, and she was really happy to see the car. All the memories of her rallying adventure with friend Enid came back, and we tempted her out for a drive. Even in her senior years, she'd lost none of her gusto behind the wheel, which was a little scary."

Once sorted post-rebuild, the most famous of the 1930s AC sports cars began an active life



Signature March styling with slab tank and twin spares. Below, from left: Haig rests by barricaded bridge at Tournus – hood is raised for protection from the sun; posing with her silverware; crashed project as discovered

in Vintage Sports-Car Club hillclimbs, rally events and driving tests, and the car covered many memorable road miles in England and Europe. Highlights have included the Mille Miglia retrospective, a car-and-balloon challenge from London to Paris and a spirited parade around Spa on an international AC rally. On all occasions, it was driven to events.

In 2014, David planned to retrace Haig's wheeltracks by entering the Endurance Rally Association's new Alpine Trial for pre-war cars. I'm sure that the grand-niece of Field Marshal Earl Haig, and founder member of the Historic Sports Car Club, would approve. "Betty drove the event on retreaded tyres and used engine oil," says David. "Hopefully the roads will be better and the weather cooler."

My interest in ACs stems from childhood, when my dad bought a Buckland tourer, but a lucky meeting with David at the Circuit des Remparts in 1985 sealed that enthusiasm for Thames Ditton's finest and has led to some of my most memorable motoring experiences. That fantastic weekend was capped by EPJ 101 winning the concours at Angoulême and David claiming an impressive prize of his weight in vintage Rémy Martin cognac. The subsequent road trip home with new friends on back-roads across Brittany and Normandy, our borrowed Dax Cobra following in the wheeltracks of the silver 16/80, was a magical sunny adventure, and the opportunity to swap cars educated me in the ways of this pre-war beauty.

Last September we marked that memorable introduction with a joyous drive around David's favourite Dorset roads, and again the appeal of EPJ was quickly confirmed. Firstly, the graceful styling attracts. Its presence is less sensational than the contemporary rival Jaguar SS100, but, from the *Le Jeune* mascot to the purposeful twin spare wheels and chromed luggage rack, it's hard to fault from any angle. Only the small-diameter drum brakes that look lost in the tall, narrow-spoke wheels spoil its thoroughbred stance. With the well-designed hood erected, the 16/80 has even more character.

> *'It's comfortable cruising at 60mph, but will push on to 70 for short bursts'*

Turn the low, chromed handle for the rear-hinged cutaway door and the traditional cockpit immediately evokes privileged 1930s motoring. The bucket seats with 'Float-on-air' inflated bases are comfy and supportive, while the door trim features a dramatic, Deco-style sunburst design with a handy zip-up pocket.

With the seat well forward, it's a squeeze to slide my short legs under the broad four-spoke wheel. The dashboard – with a sweeping scuttle that's a signature of the Earl of March styling – matches the body colour and is packed with handsome Smiths instruments, the speedo to the right of the column reading up to 100mph.

First owner Thompson ordered metallic paint – AC was one of the first to feature such a finish – but didn't want a glovebox. "It's the only 16/80 without one," explains David, "and Haig approved of the omission. 'Why would you want that ugly hole?' she said to me!"

Turn the key, press the dinky starter button on the central ignition cluster and the 'six' wakes with a rorty rasp. The fly-off handbrake is deep under the scuttle, which initially makes hill starts awkward, but the triple-SU engine is more responsive and torquey than you would expect for a pre-war 2-litre. Little wonder the 16/80 was a familiar sight on 1930s trials, particularly in the hands of Ray Morley.

The Moss gearbox is stirred by a short gearlever topped with a wonderful soap-bar-sized white knob. It initially feels like a notchy, slow change that is not helped by the heavy clutch, but it's immensely rewarding to snick cleanly once you master the double-declutch timing. As with all Moss gearboxes, you can't rush the movement.

The chassis has conventional semi-elliptic springs all round and rides well on adjustable Hartford friction dampers, but there's scuttle shake and steering kickback over the worst bumps and potholes. "There are comparisons with the Ace," says David. "It's a very seat-of-the-pants feel, and I've never spun one."

With a limited lock, the steering requires busy hand-to-hand work for the tight turns, but its action is precise and perfectly weighted at higher speeds and through more open bends. The top speed is around 85mph, while the later, supercharged 'sloping tail' 16/90 was good for 90mph – as Hescroff once proved when driving the Nordschleife. Geared for 20mph per 1000rpm, EPJ is most comfortable cruising at 60mph, but it will eagerly push on to 70mph for short bursts.

I've long wanted to drive up the spectacular, tree-lined Blandford Road from Kingston Lacy past Badbury Rings in a memorable car and, with the windscreen folded flat, the AC is a treat. The view over the dashboard cowls and down the handsome louvred bonnet, with the chrome greyhound sprinter mascot pointing ahead, is very nostalgic.

After a morning run, the 16/80 is rested at Shapwick. Enquiries about the handsome car are continual throughout our pub lunch, but surprisingly few know the AC marque. We can't help being distracted by the WW1 memorial in the centre of the village. The engraved death count, including many from the Kerley family, is a chilling tribute. Betty Haig bought EPJ in 1939, just as the next hellish conflict started. Prevented from taking the new sports car abroad on rallies, she put it to work on her Sussex farms, where it paid its way delivering produce during the war years.

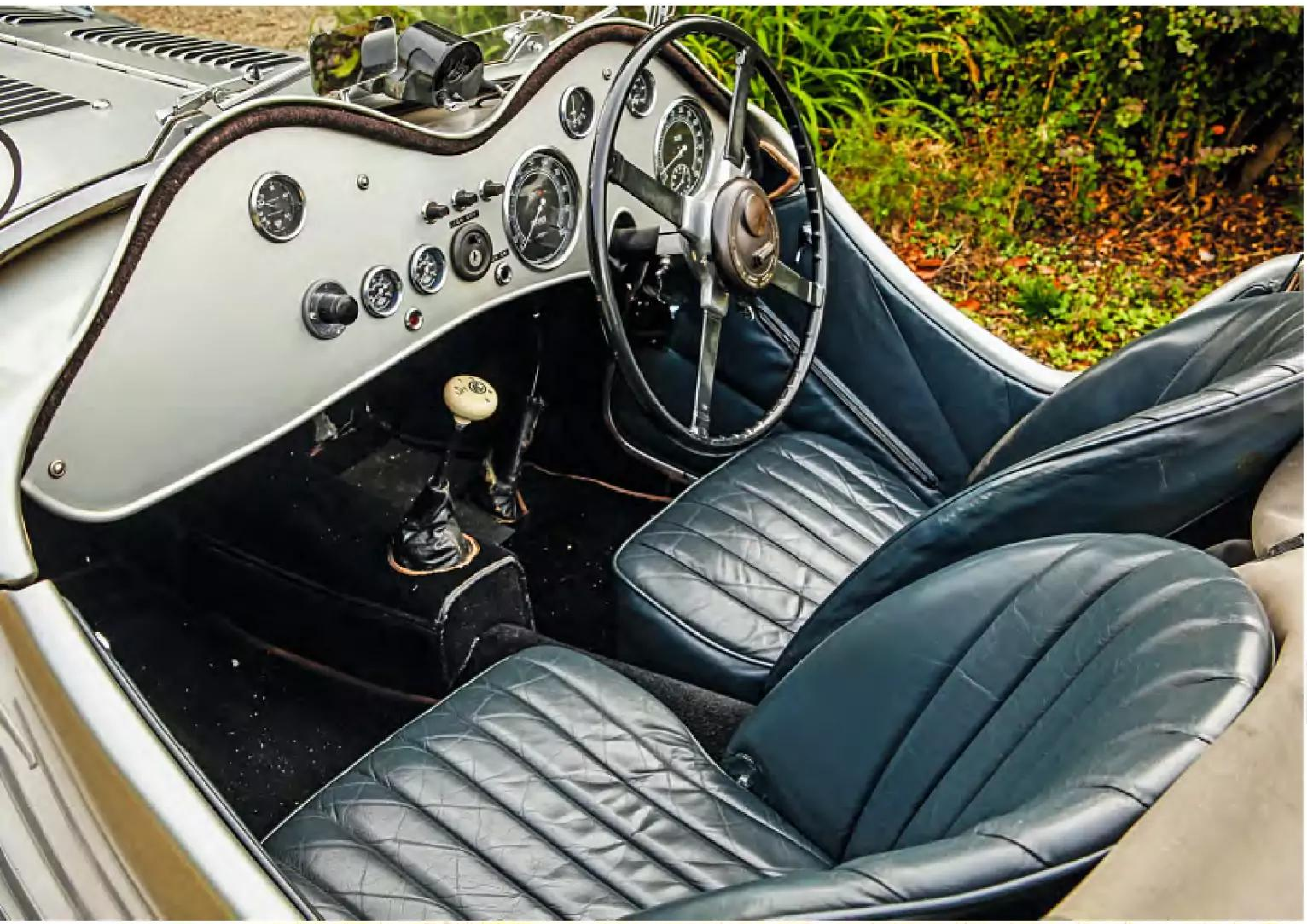
Like all great cars with a rich history, EPJ continually conjures vivid imagery from its past as old photographs are studied and old stories unfold. As it rests, bathed in autumn sunshine, it's easy to imagine the AC back in Sussex, laden with apples as Hurricanes and Spitfires flew overhead on their way to confront the Luftwaffe. Haig had driven a Singer through Germany *en route* to winning a gold rally medal in the 1936 Olympic Games, so she knew what evil was brewing on the Continent.

As youngsters, my two sons always referred to EPJ as 'the magic car' due to its habit of appearing on the drive after late-night returns from events. For many reasons, it'll always be high on my list of all-time favourites.

MARCH FAMILY LINK

The first AC 16/80 short-chassis two-seater Competition Sports is, appropriately, owned by Lord March, the grandson of the car's stylist and founder of Goodwood's Festival of Speed and Revival. Finished in silver-blue, CPL 572 was completed in July 1935 and made a low-key debut on the Barnstaple Trial, driven by Pigé Leschallas. The 16/80 was later handed over to *The Autocar* for a road test around the West Country. That September, just prior to its display at the London Motor Show, it was entered in a one-hour speed trial organised by the Motor Cycling Club at Brooklands, where it averaged 79.61mph.

After many years in France, the 16/80 is now a familiar sight at Goodwood. "My grandfather styled various ACs in the '30s but never owned one," says Lord March. "For me, the 16/80 is one of the very best-looking British sports cars of the 1930s, and I'm proud to own the prototype."



Clockwise from left: stylish interior with comfy seats but no glovebox; AC mascot designed by Louis Lejeune; ambition fulfilled – Walsh drives 16/80 down the tree-lined Blandford Road

604·JHK
Petite

The forgotten AC

Nobody much loves the three-wheeled Petite. A drive in a survivor reveals why that may be

WORDS **JON PRESSNELL** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

The Petite is, if you like, the AC that dare not speak its name. Decades after the final example was bolted together, this cuboid trike is cold-shouldered by most of the Ace enthusiasts and Cobra fanciers of the AC Owners' Club, reduced to a dozen or so survivors, and – indignity of indignities – confused in most people's minds with a seemingly identical invalid carriage that was an equally improbable product of the Thames Ditton-based manufacturing concern.

Yet this orphaned three-wheeler was, statistically, AC's most important vehicle of the '50s. Think about it: around 1290 2 Litres were made, all but 30 or so in the 1948-'54 period. The combined score for Ace, Aceca and Greyhound was 1089 from 1954-'63. Consider, too, that, whether or not the 2 Litre made money, the Ace was supposedly sold at a loss. In contrast, AC churned out 2000-odd Petites from 1953 to '58 – and it is doubtful that such a low-cost vehicle, bringing no prestige to the company name, would have been kept in production for five years had it not been profitable. Indeed, it's probably true that the little trike to a large degree helped make the Ace and Cobra possible.

Context is all. The '50s was the last decade when cheap three-wheelers had a ready market. Those on a low wage were making the transition from two wheels to four, and a trike, driveable on a motorcycle licence and taxed at £5 a year, made the perfect stepping stone. Increasing affluence and greater availability of new and secondhand cars would lessen the appeal of such Minimalist motoring, but then the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the resultant imposition of petrol rationing put microcars back in the spotlight.

So there was some logic to the Petite, particularly because it shared its chassis design with the invalid carriage AC had been making since 1951 – and which by '57 had evolved into the Acedes. Making two related products alongside each other can only have enhanced the economics of the venture, especially with such trikes being built to an advantageous government contract.

It helped that the Petite was not hugely sophisticated. Built around a punt using a mix of ribbed steel pressings and channel- and box-section members, the alloy-panelled AC featured no complex curvatures. The power unit was rudimentary, too: a single-cylinder, two-stroke Villiers industrial engine of 246cc, making just 8bhp. Fixed on a rubber-suspended subframe, it drove a Burman three-speed motorcycle gearbox via three vee-belts, with chain final drive to the differential.

Independent rear suspension featured all the same, with the swinging halfshafts located by surprisingly hefty trailing arms and sprung by coil spring/damper units. At the front, a motorcycle-type steering head was used with a trailing-arm set-up using two coil springs under tension and a central telescopic damper, the lot steered by a Burman cam-and-peg box. While the 18in wire rear wheels had hydraulic brakes, the 8in front was unbraked – but then the AC weighed a whisker under 896lb (406kg), to meet motor-tricycle legislation.

Such, then, was the AC Petite that entered production in 1953, following its launch at the November 1952 Motorcycle Show. For '56, the MkII arrived, with 12in pressed-steel wheels all round and a revised 353cc Villiers with a more robust crank, more accessible carburettor and dynamo, and a giddying 8.25bhp. By then it cost £350 including Purchase Tax, but for an extra £29 you could buy a De Luxe version featuring chrome bumpers, locking doors and windows, 'elephant's ear' flashers, a spare wheel and chrome trim strips. Such gaiety pushed the AC to within £11 of the sit-up-and-beg Popular, then Britain's cheapest real car – but of course you couldn't drive Ford's 1930s throwback on a motorcycle licence, which you could the AC if you blocked off reverse gear.

Anyone growing up in the early 1960s would have had a nodding familiarity with the Petite, so it comes as a shock to hear that so few have survived. Fortunately, the AC has a doughty champion in Alan Budd, who claims to be probably the only man in the world ever to have owned three. "I just took up the cudgels for them," says the retired Sussex policeman. "If nobody spoke up, they would just slide into oblivion. So I try to keep owners in contact with each other – people have them, but they don't communicate. My dream is to get all 12 of the survivors together. It will be my crowning achievement."

Why this enthusiasm? Pure nostalgia, says Alan: back in 1960 a Petite was his first car – and the first car in his family – when he was a teenage police cadet. He says: "I adored it. To have your own car was wonderful – and my wife, whom I courted in the AC, was quite thrilled, because she hadn't had a boyfriend before who'd had a car." Yet even then, wasn't he ribbed by mates for his choice of vehicle? "No," he says, "it was cool, really. My next-door neighbour had a Gordon three-wheeler and there was a Bond down the road, and another Gordon. Three-wheelers were quite prolific at the time – they weren't an oddity at all."

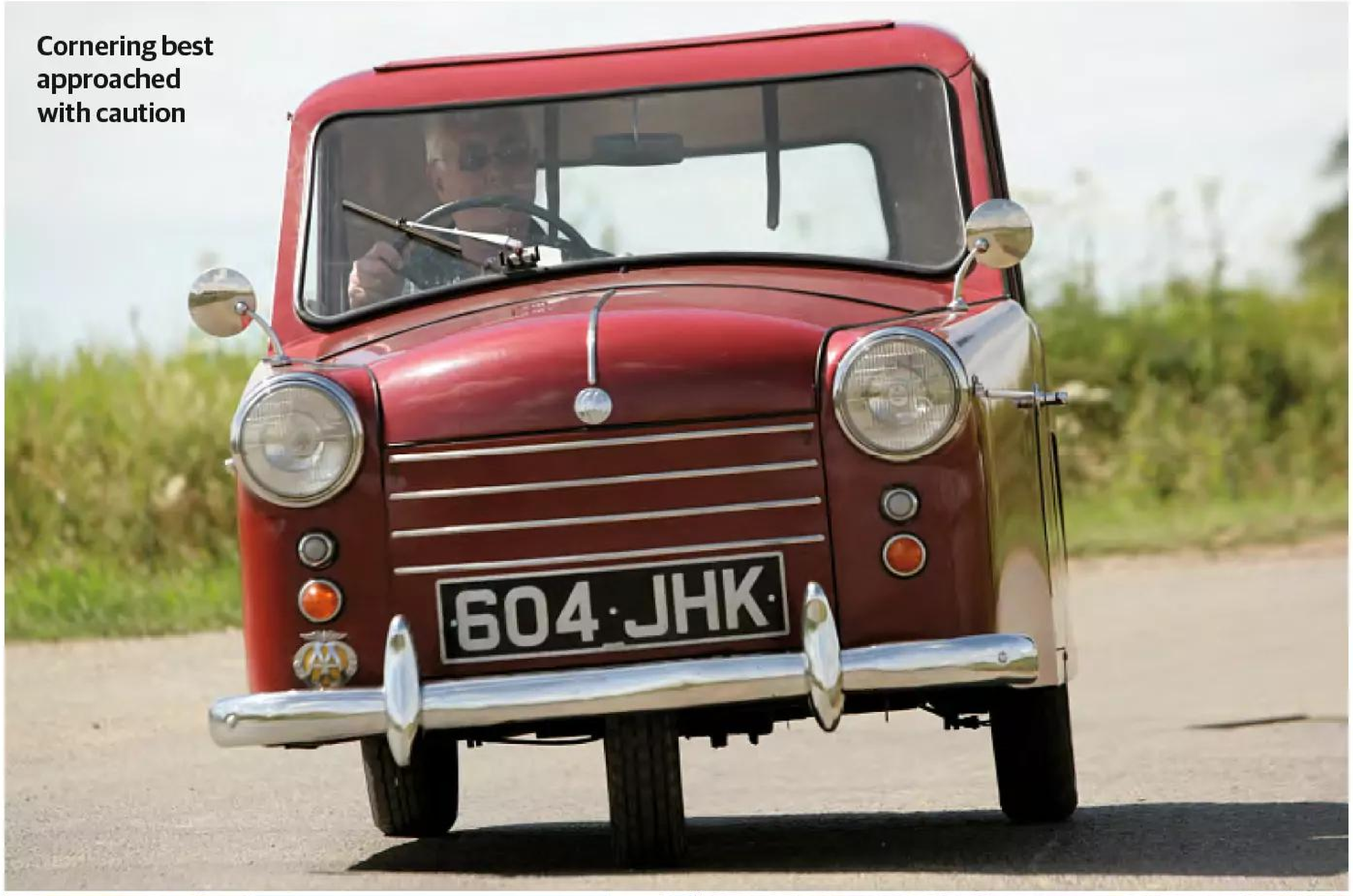
Alan used his car in all weathers, including going tobogganning in the infamous winter of 1962-'63, his brother holding on to the toboggan poised on the roof, a hand through the AC's standard roll-back fabric top. The Petite was even used as the most improbable police pursuit vehicle ever, when one night Alan's sergeant asked him to tail a local miscreant into town. Given the racket the AC makes, you can only assume that the felon was stone deaf.

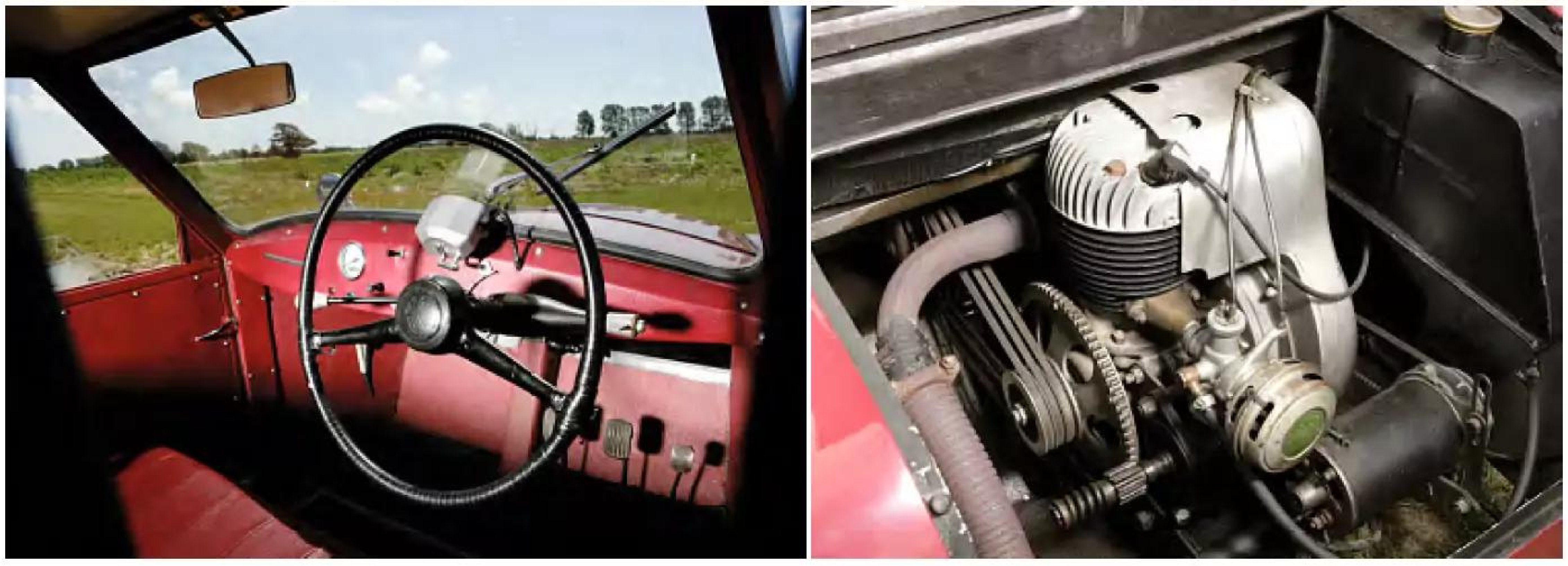
Afforded only basic maintenance, the MkI AC – bought for £50, sold for £20 – was largely reliable. The only problem was an occasional failure to start, owing to a weak coil. Alan's cure was to whisk the plug out and rub the electrode with pencil lead. "That put a bit of flare into the spark," he says, "but how I never wore out the thread on the plug hole I'll never know."

On his retirement, Alan found himself at the Bath Microcar Rally one year and asked if any Petites were expected. Told that the last one had been seen about five years before, his memories were rekindled and he joined the Register of Unusual Microcars, eventually

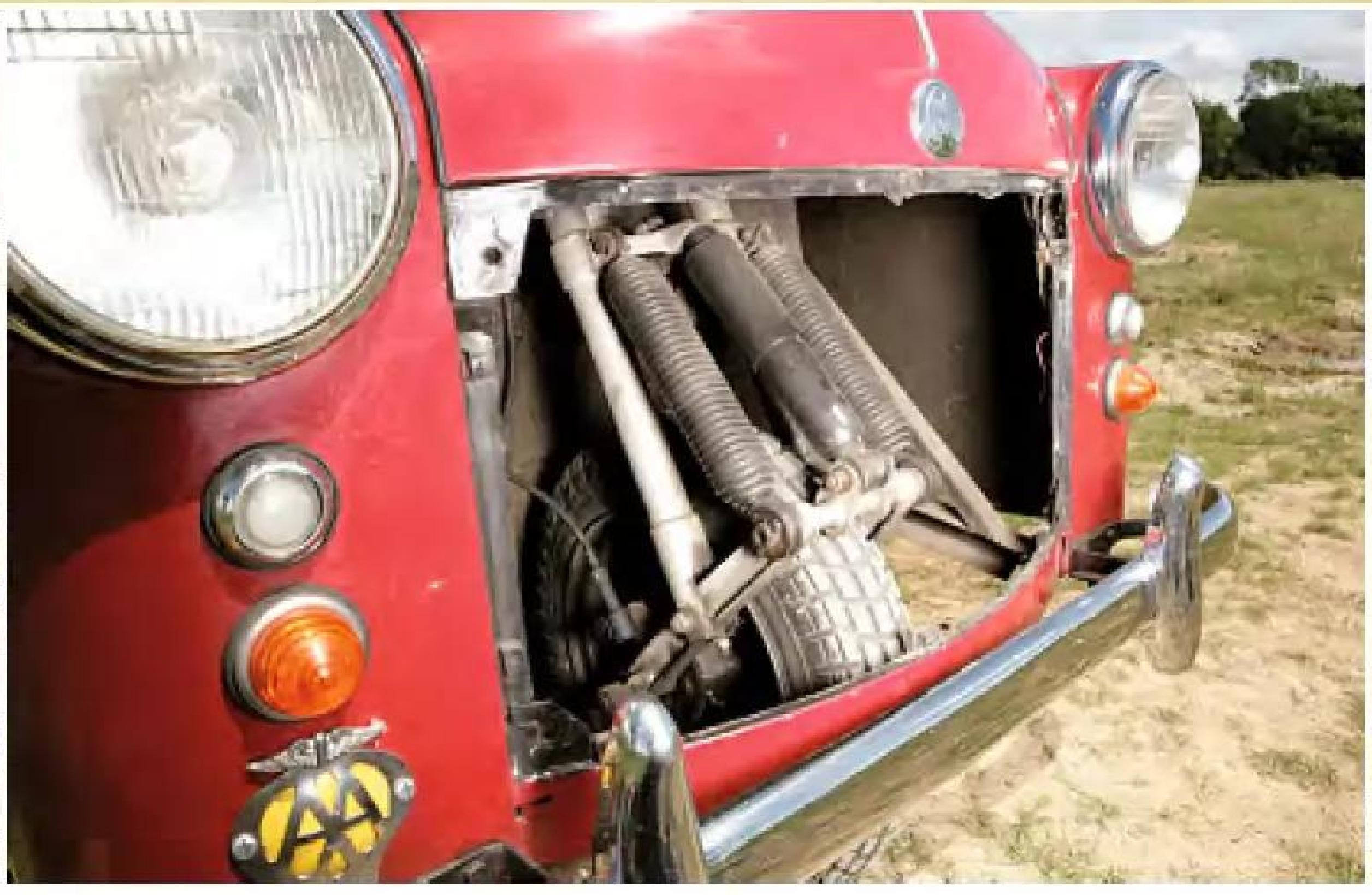
AC ASIDES

- The superficially similar 1957-'67 Acedes invalid carriage had a narrower, one-seater body with a single door and a three-window cockpit; power came from a 197cc Villiers engine. About 15,000 were made
- At least one Petite delivery van was built
- Ernie Bailey of Buckland Body Works Ltd, responsible for the AC 2 Litre Buckland tourer, constructed a series of 20 or so motor-rickshaws on the Petite chassis
- Bailey and his wife (who also modelled for AC's publicity) took a MkI Petite non-stop to Cannes (above). Despite this, the couple remained happily married
- It was possible to pull-start the Petite, lawnmower-style, by wrapping a strap around a flange on the crankshaft
- AC discouraged owners from tinkering with the car. 'When it leaves the factory the Petite is as perfect as possible through the efforts of the workmen producing it; it is in the owner's hands to make or mar, as he wishes,' warned the handbook
- Light engineering and subcontract work for the aircraft industry helped keep AC afloat. AC also constructed the 'Bag Boy' collapsible lightweight golf-club trolley and rebodied the train carriages that took holidaymakers along Southend pier
- The company returned to the idea of a three-wheeler at the beginning of the 1970s, building two vaguely Reliant-like prototypes powered by the Steyr-Puch twin used in the then-current version of the invalid trike. There was also a single four-wheeled prototype, every bit as ugly as the two three-wheelers


Cornering best approached with caution


Left-right: flat floor gives good legroom; four-main-bearing MkII motor – note exposed flywheel, triple-belt drive

AC claimed a 40-45mph maximum. Below, from left: substantial lever doesn't make gear selection any easier; twin coil springs and single damper hide behind front grille; tail-lights aren't original



'A wish not to plant the AC on its roof curtails my bid to explore the performance envelope: a clutch-slipping, pass-me-the-earmuffs 30mph is the best I dare'

unearthing a Petite in Scotland. That was sold to fund flying lessons, but when a restored example came on to the market, Alan snapped it up. "I was given the opportunity to buy the best Petite in the world, so I couldn't refuse," he says of the 1956 MkII. "When I'm in it I'm 18 again. It's great fun. It's sheer nostalgia – and there's nothing wrong with that."

More car-like than many contemporaries, the AC has an austere elegance to its square-cut but well-proportioned lines – helped by the spatted rear wheels and generous glass area that confers an agreeable airiness to the cabin. The glazing doesn't possess the suggestion of a curve, and the square-section A- and B-posts, channel-section cant rail and flat internal panels are crude, while the biggest item on the leathercloth-covered dash is the king-sized Lucas wiper motor. The ripples in the near-flat panels are no great surprise, but at least the eye is drawn away by the ex-Austin A30 bumpers.

It might be Alan's first automotive love, but he is honest about the driving experience, describing the handling and roadholding as dreadful. "It's frightening," he reassures me as I slide on to the fixed bench. "Don't get carried away. A happy speed is 22mph; everything is in harmony. Drive past that and you'll get everything rattling. On my MkI the optimum cruising speed was 35mph, but on this one there's wheel wobble if you push it. Maybe the geometry isn't quite right."

Thus forewarned, there's clearly going to be no point in trying to emulate the *Motor Cycling* road testers, who achieved a tyre-frying 49mph – and 50mpg – in their 1955 test, while noting that acceleration was 'adequate for the type of public likely to invest in the AC'. Keep to the Budd-prescribed 22mph, and on a whisker of throttle the Petite lawnmowers along in top with adequate refinement, although talk in *The Motor Cycle* article of 'turbine-like smoothness' is clearly fanciful. Hit 25mph and the cast-iron Villiers single gets rough and rattly, the seat starts shaking and the whole vehicle becomes a judderingly cacophonous torture chamber.

That's presupposing that you've mastered the quadrant-operated gearchange. "The gearshift is abysmal," agrees Alan. "You learn the touch you need to feed in the gears. It would have been better to have put the gearlever on the floor, with a more direct linkage." With clean changes sometimes eluding even the proud owner, it hardly seems a disgrace that it takes me endless to-and-fro wibbling of the lever before a gear deigns to mesh.

Even without this, a wish not to plant the AC on its roof curtails my bid to explore the performance envelope – a clutch-slipping, pass-me-the-earmuffs 30mph is the best I dare. Never mind *Motor Cycling*'s joker who pronounced the Petite 'one of the best road-holders the tester has yet driven' before recounting how it 'could be slammed into corners without any sign of lifting'. Me, I chicken out as the AC starts to rock from side to side as speed on undulating surfaces breaches the 22mph sound-barrier and the car rolls on to its front wheel entering a bend. Maybe this is the perfectly safe response of a suspension system recognised at the time as being unusually comfortable for the type of vehicle, but I'm not prepared to find out.

What all this amounts to is that the Petite is singularly vile to drive – notwithstanding the positive brakes and direct steering. Is Alan's car representative of the breed? Maybe not, but all the evidence suggests that it's not that far off how the AC was when new. Rare were the microcars that were a genuine pleasure on the road – and you don't exactly get off to a good start with the single wheel at the wrong end and a stone-age Villiers industrial engine tucked up its rump. Praise be to Alec Issigonis and the Mini for putting an end to the fascinating but ultimately futile practice of trying to blend car and motorcycle: the result was almost invariably the worst of both worlds, and the Petite is probably as effective an exemplar as any. That Alan Budd has chosen to defend Thames Ditton's contribution to the species is all the more to his credit.

Thanks to *Jean Hammond at the Register of Unusual Microcars (rumcars.org)*

THREE CARD TRICK

240 DPE
659 CGT

The sublime Ace was offered in AC-, Ford- and Bristol-engined forms, but which is best? Examples of each convene in the Yorkshire Dales to find out

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

'A resilient ride, viceless handling and lively performance meld into a driving pleasure that's equal to its immaculate looks'

Beautiful Ford 2.6 leads Ace pack over the Yorkshire Dales. Right, from top: original AC motor; BMW-inspired Bristol; tuned 2.6 Ford Zephyr with Mays head and Webers

AC ACE

Sold/number built 1953-'63/223
Construction steel ladder chassis with 3in-diameter main tubes and fabricated suspension box at each end, skeleton frame of ¾in steel tube with 18-gauge aluminium body
Engine alloy block with iron cylinder liners and head, 1991cc straight-six with vertical valves operated by chain-driven overhead camshaft, three SU 1¼in H2 carburettors
Max power 90bhp @ 4500rpm
Max torque 110lb ft @ 2500rpm
Transmission four-speed all-synchromesh Moss gearbox with Laycock de Normanville overdrive on top three gears, RWD
Suspension independent, by transverse leaf spring, lower wishbones, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering Bishop cam-type
Brakes Al-Fin drums f/r (optional front discs later)
Length 12ft 8in (3861mm)
Width 4ft 11in (1499mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2240lb (1016kg)
Price new £1436 (1954)

AC ACE BRISTOL

(Where different from AC)
Sold/number built 1956-'62/463
Engine iron-block, alloy-head 1971cc straight-six, single high camshaft with pushrods for inlet and crossover pushrods to operate exhaust valves, three Solex carburettors
Max power 125bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 122lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission four-speed, all-synchromesh CR9 and CR12 with Laycock overdrive. Also the option of a lightweight AC gearbox with aluminium housing and TR gears
Brakes Girling discs front, Al-Fin drums rear
Weight 2268lb (1029kg)
Price new £2045 (1959, with disc brakes)

AC ACE 2.6

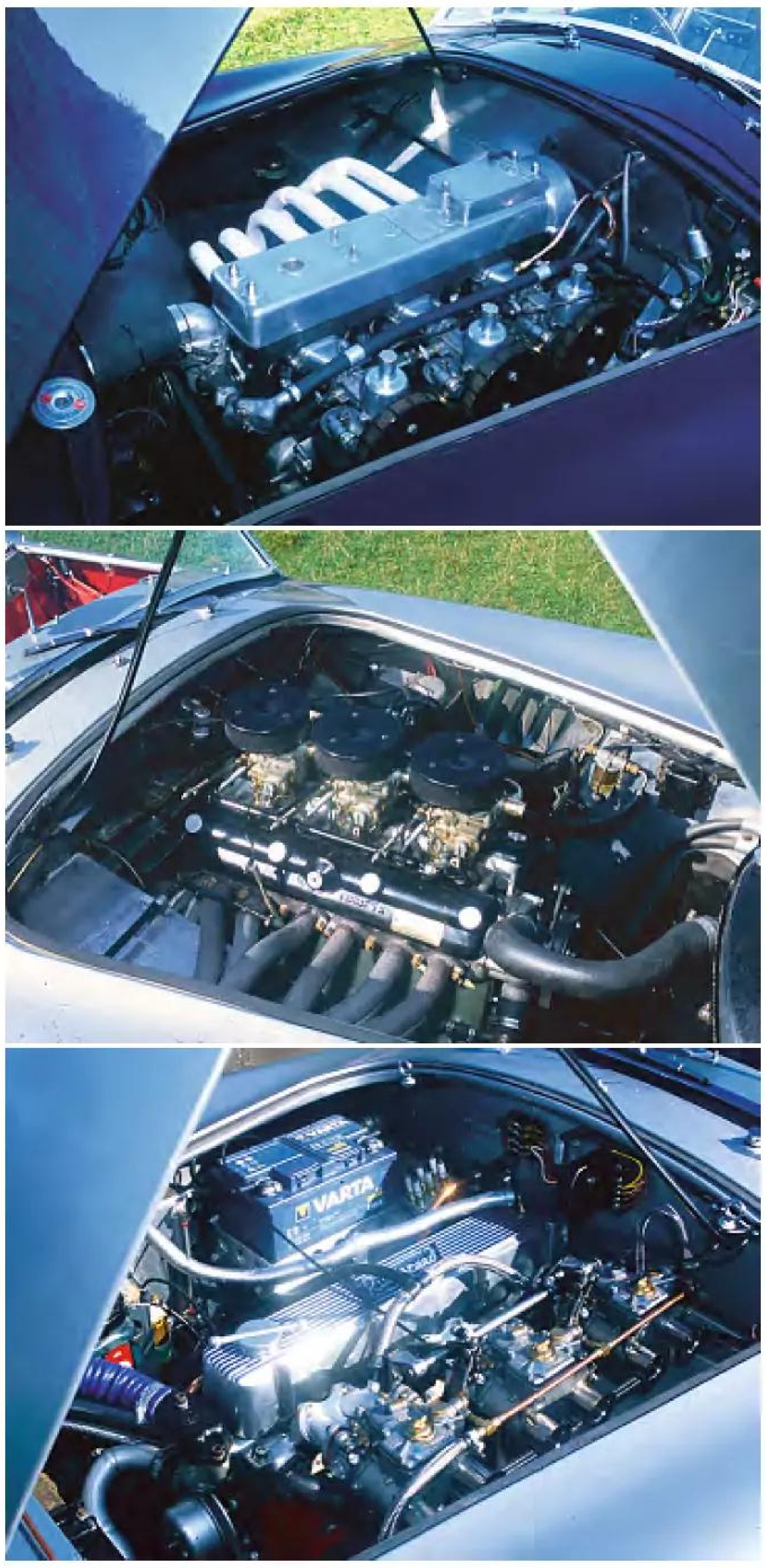
(Where different from AC)
Sold/number built 1961-'63/37
Engine Ford Zephyr MkII 206E all-iron 2553cc straight-six, with overhead valves operated by pushrods, triple 1½in SUs as standard. Featured car has Ruddspeed Stage V light-alloy Mays six-port head and triple Weber DCOE2 carbs
Max power 120bhp @ 5000rpm to 170bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 132lb ft @ 2000rpm
Brakes Girling discs front, Al-Fin drums rear
Weight 2352lb (1067kg)
Price new £2162 (plus £248 for Stage IV tune)

AC Cars has a long tradition of building truly beautiful, bespoke sports cars, and no model better demonstrates the Surrey firm's reputation as the 'Savile Row of the car world' than the dazzling Ace. Decades after Specials builder John Tojeiro drove his all-independent, Lea-Francis-powered creation from Cambridge to AC's base, three Aces with alternative engine options – AC, Bristol and Ford Zephyr – meet in the Yorkshire Dales to help us decide which spec produced the ultimate model.

Tojeiro only earned £5 a car, but today these rare handbuilt visions continue to climb in value. All share the same simple tube chassis with suspension towers carrying transverse leaf springs and wishbones, but so coveted is the last and rarest of the line that it makes twice the money of the original, AC-engined model. Is the rarest and youngest, Ford-powered version deserving of such a premium?

The original Ace was hastily developed from Tojeiro's rugged sports-racers – as campaigned most spectacularly by Cliff Davis – and made its debut at the 1953 Earls Court Show, where it was rapturously welcomed by the British motoring press, which couldn't wait to road test it. Decades later, it still looks supremely elegant as Rodney Kettle's deep metallic blue example proves. From any angle the delicate Ace's clean, elegant form is superb, and, despite its Italian influence, the styling remains emphatically English. As with AC's pre-war 16/80 models, its delightfully balanced proportions and classic detailing are spellbinding in a discreet, modest way that makes them doubly alluring: this is the Kay Kendall of sports cars. Although the styling owed much to Carrozzeria Touring's *barchetta* body, as fitted to the Ferrari 166MM, the Thames Ditton team, led by Alan Turner and Desmond Stratton, did a brilliant job of reinventing the Latin look.

The AC 2-litre 'six' dates back to 1922, but its long stroke makes it smooth and torquey, and its low-rev flexibility contrasts with the hectic Bristol. From lazy tickover to rasping peak, the engine pulls eagerly and never reveals its vintage origins. Up front, the sizzle of the cam chain and clicking valves are soon drowned out by the rorty bark from the twin small-bore pipes behind as you explore the Ace's race-bred chassis. What the 90bhp 'six' lacks in outright power, the all-independent suspension and excellent weight distribution amply makes up for with superb high-speed poise. The Ace's ability to drift through open corners with a touch of opposite lock is a rare driving pleasure. The worm-and-sector steering, when it is as well set up as here, is a joy to command: communicative, well-weighted and sharply



geared, it flatters any driver. Only when its taxi tyres rub on the rear arches is its composure disturbed. Converted to front disc brakes by the factory in 1955, this early Ace stops as well as it corners, and the distinctive central handbrake, which resembles a piece of chrome scaffolding, easily locks the back wheels.

Other than a tent-like hood construction that would confound even the smartest cub scout, the AC-engined Ace is a hugely rewarding machine. Resilient ride, viceless handling and lively performance meld into a driving pleasure that's equal to its immaculate looks. At 112bhp per ton, it lacks the ultimate performance to match a rival Jaguar XK's straight-line grunt, but its overall character, like a faithful friend, is always on your side. Once the road starts to twist, the Ace's competition breeding sets it apart from more powerful contemporaries. Second only to the short-lived Zephyr, it is the rarest of the family – with production totalling 223, of which 99 were right-hand drive. As late as 1960, Thames Ditton was still getting orders for the cheapest Ace option: the last car left the factory bound for Canada.

Where Rodney's AC-engined model is in faithfully standard order, Tony Bancroft has developed his superb Bristol variant to the ultimate degree. At the Ace 50th-anniversary race, this dedicated super-fit 60-something was fourth fastest around Donington, but it was one of the few entrants to drive to and from the event. This immaculate silver machine has been finely tuned over the past 10 years by Tony himself and leading specialists such as Ian Nuthall in Nottingham. The Bristol engine now produces around 140bhp thanks to its high-compression pistons, lightweight flywheel, gas-flowed head and competition exhaust, but it remains wonderfully tractable.

Up front, a single, broader leaf spring replaces the original multi-leaf set-up, and Spax adjustable dampers further sharpen the handling. Pagid competition pads provide welcome extra bite to the brakes, but Tony's Ace is essentially a classic club road/race car in the spirit of the original exponents – Bob Staples, Ken Rudd and Peter Bolton – who inspired it. Based in the heart of the Yorkshire Dales, Tony is spoiled for ideal Ace driving country, and the sweet Bristol motor's strident exhaust bark is regularly heard on sunny days.

From the moment you sink deep into the red leather seat – Tony has removed some of the upholstery stuffing – you just know that this car will impress. Like a snug-fitting glove, it feels so right, and instantly you experience the difference between AC- and Bristol-engined models. The German-designed 'six' loves to rev and needs to be exercised to the top end in order to enjoy its wonderful performance. With a tuned engine and a sorted, sharper

Bristol feels the fastest of the trio. Right: classic English cockpit style with Smiths dials, three-spoke wood-rimmed wheel and superb leather seats

PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

	AC	BRISTOL	FORD ZEPHYR	RUDDSPEED STAGE 4	COBRA 289
0-60mph	11.4 secs	9 secs	8.1 secs	7.2 secs	5.2 secs
0-100mph	28.9 secs (90mph)	25.8 secs	23.3 secs	19 secs	13 secs
Standing ¼-mile	17.8 secs	16.8 secs	16.6 secs	15.6 secs	13.8 secs
Maximum speed	104mph	119mph	116mph	120.8mph	136mph
Fuel consumption	25mpg	21.6mpg	21mpg	18mpg	14mpg

chassis, this mesmerising machine feels the fastest of the bunch, and on a smooth race track it would leave the others panting to keep up. Driving from Ribblehead Viaduct to Hawes, its beautifully weighted steering, glorious poise and ever-eager engine are in blissful harmony. Forget its tyre-smoking fireball offspring, the Cobra, because it will never reward like this joyous 1950s classic. Only motorcyclists would appreciate the way this finely honed Ace communicates and carries speed.

All three Aces benefit from the overdrive option, but you use it least with the Bristol's slick transmission. Snicking up and down the sweet gearbox is immensely satisfying as you let the busy engine sing its heart out. Little wonder that, once bought, lucky owners keep Ace Bristols for life. Unlike the AC and Zephyr variants, this thoroughbred motor has a jewel-like quality that feels totally in tune with the competition breeding of the chassis. Maybe it feels so right because Cliff Davis' original racer was so equipped.

In 1954, legendary Ace fettler Ken Rudd converted his car to Bristol power, and his success eventually persuaded the factory to offer the option from February 1956; the extra cost – £208 over the AC unit – didn't deter buyers. The Bristol's impressive competition success on both sides of the Atlantic boosted sales, and it became the most popular Ace choice at more than double the production of the AC-engined model, with most examples (241 of them) heading to America.

Although the Bristol engine remained competitive on the tracks, as Rudd conclusively proved with an impressive seventh overall at Le Mans in 1959, its days were numbered on the production line at Filton. It still suited a sports car, yet this busy, high-revving straight-six lacked the refinement and torque required for grand tourers. Already Frazer Nash and Bristol had considered German and American V8 transplants, and finally a letter arrived at Thames Ditton announcing the end of Bristol engine production. Short-term supply was pledged while stocks lasted, but the Hurlocks urgently needed alternative engines to power the Ace and Aceca into the next decade.

Again, Worthing-based Ace exponent Rudd provided the perfect answer. As a Ford tuning specialist, he suggested the Zephyr's straight-six. AC chairman William Hurlock hated the firm's association with Dagenham's pushrod, overhead-valve unit, but it was a perfect match. It was cheaper, more powerful and rugged, and it packed healthy low-down torque with great tuning potential. The 2.6-litre, all-iron 'six' also fitted quite neatly into the Ace.

To launch the new model, AC's multi-talented Alan Turner turned his hand to revising the bodywork, and the result was the most beautiful of the Ace/Cobra family. The moustache-style front end was shaved away to create a smoother, longer nose, not unlike that of the 1957 works Le Mans entry, and, combined with a smaller grille opening and tapered bonnet, the revised style looked both aggressive and alluring. Although a full £100 cheaper than the Bristol option, the Ace 2.6 was still twice the price of an Austin-Healey and a seriously exclusive machine. In a letter to leading Ace racer Bob Staples, dated May 1961, Rudd enthused about the new Zephyr option, reporting a 135mph blast 'for seven miles on the end of the M1 the other day and 100mph in 22 secs two-up and with full touring equipment'.

Mated to the trusty Moss gearbox, the lusty Ford straight-six added 112lb to the Ace's overall weight, yet in hot Stage V tune with special six-port aluminium head supplied by Rubery Owen, lightweight pistons and triple Webers, great performance was guaranteed – although initially at the cost of long-term reliability. The main bearings protested, the aluminium cylinder head developed problems and setting it up required skilled mechanics. Frustratingly, the 2.6-litre version's days were numbered – before a certain tall Texan racer came knocking at AC's factory door – and just 37 were built before the Cobra took over.

Today, all those early engine gremlins have

been sorted, and the 2.6 remains the most valuable and best-looking of the Ace line. Simon Holding's exquisite example, chassis RS 5003, was the first right-hand-drive car. Exhibited at the '61 October Earls Court Motor Show, it was acquired by Nigel Dawes in 1998 when a second, and extensive, rebuild was commissioned. Modifications including overdrive, servo brakes, Cobra 15x6in wheels, an oil cooler, aluminium radiator, a customised dash to accommodate a stylish clock and a Le Mans-style fuel filler were added during the lengthy work, which Nigel estimates cost some £40,000. The custom details might frustrate Ace purists, but to the non-connoisseur they simply embellish this highly alluring machine.

The Ford engine transforms the character of the last Ace. The gutsy, smooth and ever-urgent straight-six makes it feel a much more refined and relaxed sports car from the moment you accelerate away. Why some Ace owners advocate converting the Bishop cam steering to rack and pinion is a mystery, because a well-sorted original set-up provides near-perfect weighting with rewarding precision. Like a thoroughbred pre-war machine, its high-geared action requires little movement at the wheel to set it up for corners. Combined with the perfect 50:50 chassis balance, the 2.6 is wonderful through the fast, open sweepers on the B6255 over the Yorkshire Dales.

During the car's restoration the gearlever was shortened and, although more direct, the shift action is slightly heavier through the wide Moss gate. But, with the optional overdrive and the extra torque of the beefy Ford motor, you can flick in and out of third and top in an instant without your left hand dropping from the wheel. There's no question that the 2.6 would be more relaxing than the Bristol model for a transcontinental run, and over Alpine cols its dual character would be equally at home.

'With tuned engine and sorted chassis, the mesmerising Bristol feels the fastest. But the beefy Ford's dual character would be equally at home over the cols'

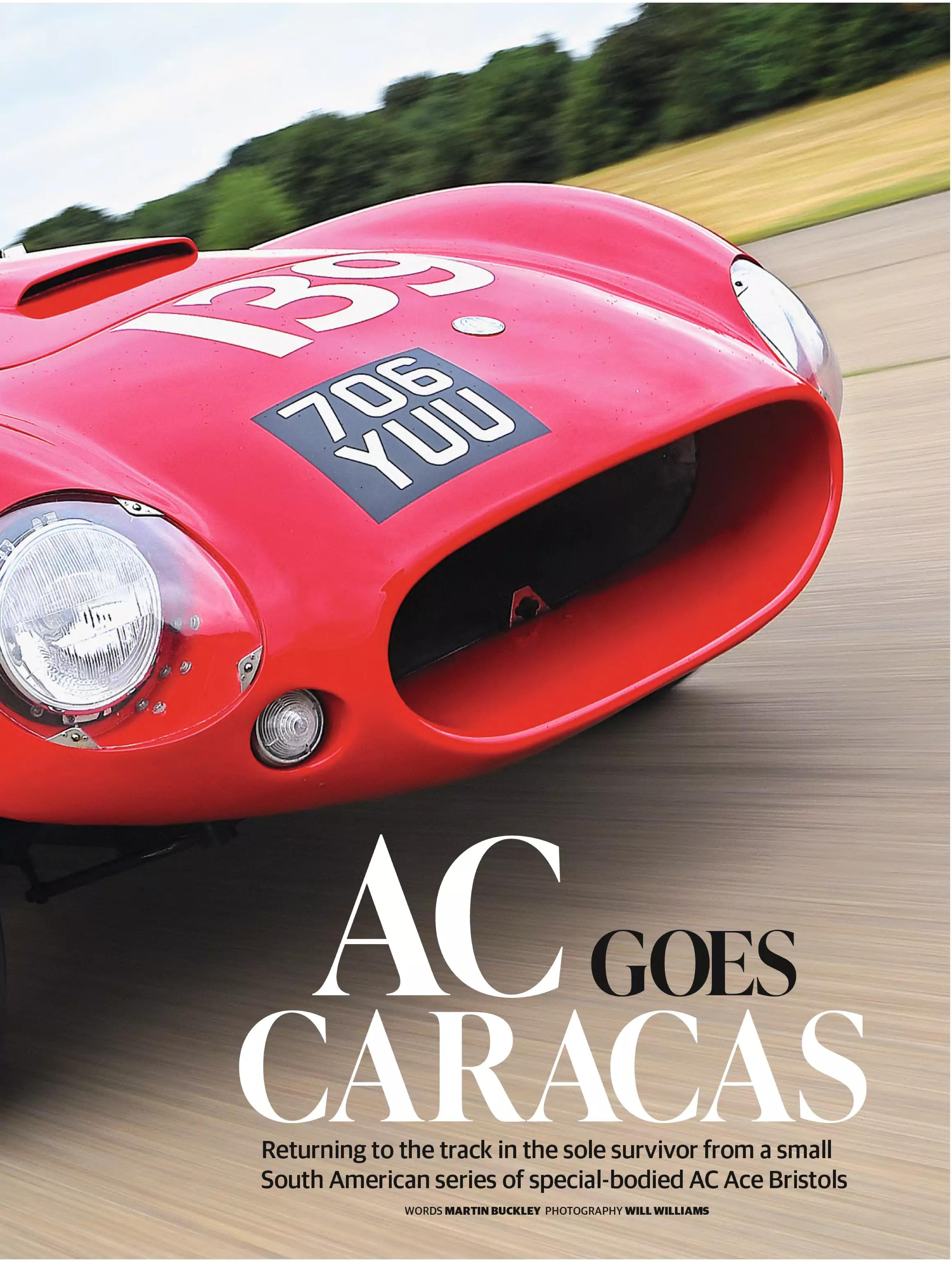
The wider wheels of Simon's car slightly spoil the steering's weight, and, although more secure when cornering at high speed, it lacks the balance and feel of the taller, narrower original wheels. Crude the Zephyr's origins might be compared with the Bristol/BMW lineage, but when stretched the exhaust note is just as exotic. The seductive combination of thirsty Webers and the fierce growl behind is heady stuff as the Ace 2.6 charges out of bends and effortlessly roars down long straights.

With unlimited finances, the choice between the Bristol and the 2.6 is tough. I adore the beautiful, revised styling of the final model, but it's too much a '60s design, and for me the Ace better evokes the earlier decade. The Ford 'six' offers lusty, trusty refinement at half the price of the cocky Cobra, yet it lacks the character and competition pedigree of the Bristol. Like Tony, I love the Bristol model's rich racing history – be it Le Mans, the Tour de France or Goodwood – so the fantasies of ownership are all the richer. But in a more rational world I'd be happy with the hefty saving of the AC-engined model, which only disappoints when directly compared with its more exotic, exclusive brothers.

Whichever model you are lucky enough to afford, they all deliver marvellously balanced handling and exquisite looks. The AC Ace remains one of the most desirable British sports cars, and it's little wonder values continue to climb. I'm still kicking myself for not stretching funds years ago when they were almost in reach.

__Thanks to__ the AC Owners' Club (acownersclub.co.uk)

139



AC GOES CARACAS

Returning to the track in the sole survivor from a small South American series of special-bodied AC Ace Bristols

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **WILL WILLIAMS**

From top: Dr Oscar Lupi chases a rival Ace in the Trofeo Shell – La Trinidad, a race he contested in 1958 and '59; on the front row in the same event

Clockwise from top: snug cockpit matches that of the standard Ace; additional length of the new nose is easy to see in profile; embossed pedals

In his oversized peaked caps and self-aggrandising military garb, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, President of Venezuela from 1952 to 1958, was your textbook dodgy mid-20th-century South American military dictator. Short and tubby in appearance, his hobbies included embezzlement, election-rigging and ruthless suppression of anyone who questioned his regime.

All of which is pretty standard stuff for this turbulent part of the world. And yet, looked at in its entirety, the legacy of Jiménez shows that nobody is all bad. In light of Venezuela's subsequent history of military *coups d'état* and political assassinations, his years in power look almost stable: even the populist lefty Hugo Chávez, president from 1999-2013, is on record as thinking highly of Jiménez.

True, he reputedly lined his own pockets to the tune of $200million while in power, but 'PJ' also used Venezuela's oil-producing wealth to develop the economy with crowd-pleasing public infrastructure projects for roads, schools and hospitals. And, like almost every other 20th-century despot from Mussolini onwards, Jiménez had an eye for fancy motor cars. He was an enthusiastic Mercedes-Benz 300SL owner who even took racing lessons from his friend Juan Manuel Fangio, so few were surprised when *el presidente* decided to put his name to a scheme to promote sports car racing in the country.

These were not to be events held on purpose-built race circuits – there were then no such venues in the country – but hardcore road-races and hillclimbs modelled along the crowd-pleasing, death-or-glory lines of the recently banned Mille Miglia and Carrera Panamericana. Period photographs, clammy with humidity, show makeshift tracks dotted with palm trees, with nothing but sandbags and hay bales between cars, spectators and tragedy.

The hot, gearbox-breaking 6.2 miles of closed-road circuit earmarked for the Caracas 1000 Kilometres was close to the Fuerte Tiuna military base. It attracted all the big factory teams and most of the star drivers of the day, but it was only in the final meeting, held in 1957, that the results would count towards the World Sports Car Championship. There was a presence from Porsche and Aston Martin, but it was the Italian equipes that went on to dominate proceedings: Fangio and Stirling Moss won aboard works 300S Maseratis in 1955 and '56 respectively, while Peter Collins – partnered by Phil Hill – took the laurels in the scrappy 1957 race in a Ferrari 335S. This brutal six-hour event famously marked the end of Maserati's top-level works efforts when all three of its 450Ss crashed.

By then the nature of the grid was changing, with the occasional 'civilian' car entered to trade blows with the pure factory racing machinery. For wealthy local privateers looking to prove themselves, the recently introduced AC Ace Bristol was rapidly emerging as a machine that would go the distance, with a good chance of honours in the under-2-litre class.

That was mainly thanks to the efforts of a certain Juan 'Jack' Fernández, a Caracas garage owner and sometime works-supported Ace driver. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, Venezuela was fast becoming one of Thames Ditton's most successful overseas markets: Fernández found homes for an impressive 41 cars – four Aces, 31 Ace Bristols, five Aceca

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Bristols and a single AC-engined Aceca – among the oil-enriched Caracas elite.

Six Aces, all but one of them local cars, entered the 1957 Venezuelan Grand Prix. One car failed to qualify, while Hap Dressel's Ace Bristol (number 54) was cut in half when it became involved in an accident with the Maserati 450S driven by Stirling Moss. The Equipo CADV Ace of importer Fernández was a DNF on lap 18, but the remaining three ACs were placed 16th, 17th and 21st.

It is at this point that the German garage owner Karl Pentz enters the Venezuelan Ace Bristol story. The latter two finishers had been modified in his workshop to extract more speed – mainly by way of improved aerodynamics – for owner/racer Renny Ottolina and Colombian driver Antonio Izquierdo. Chassis BEX148 (B for Bristol, EX for export), as pictured here, did not take part in the Caracas 1000, but it is the only one of the three Pentz-modified cars – which were all slightly different – to survive.

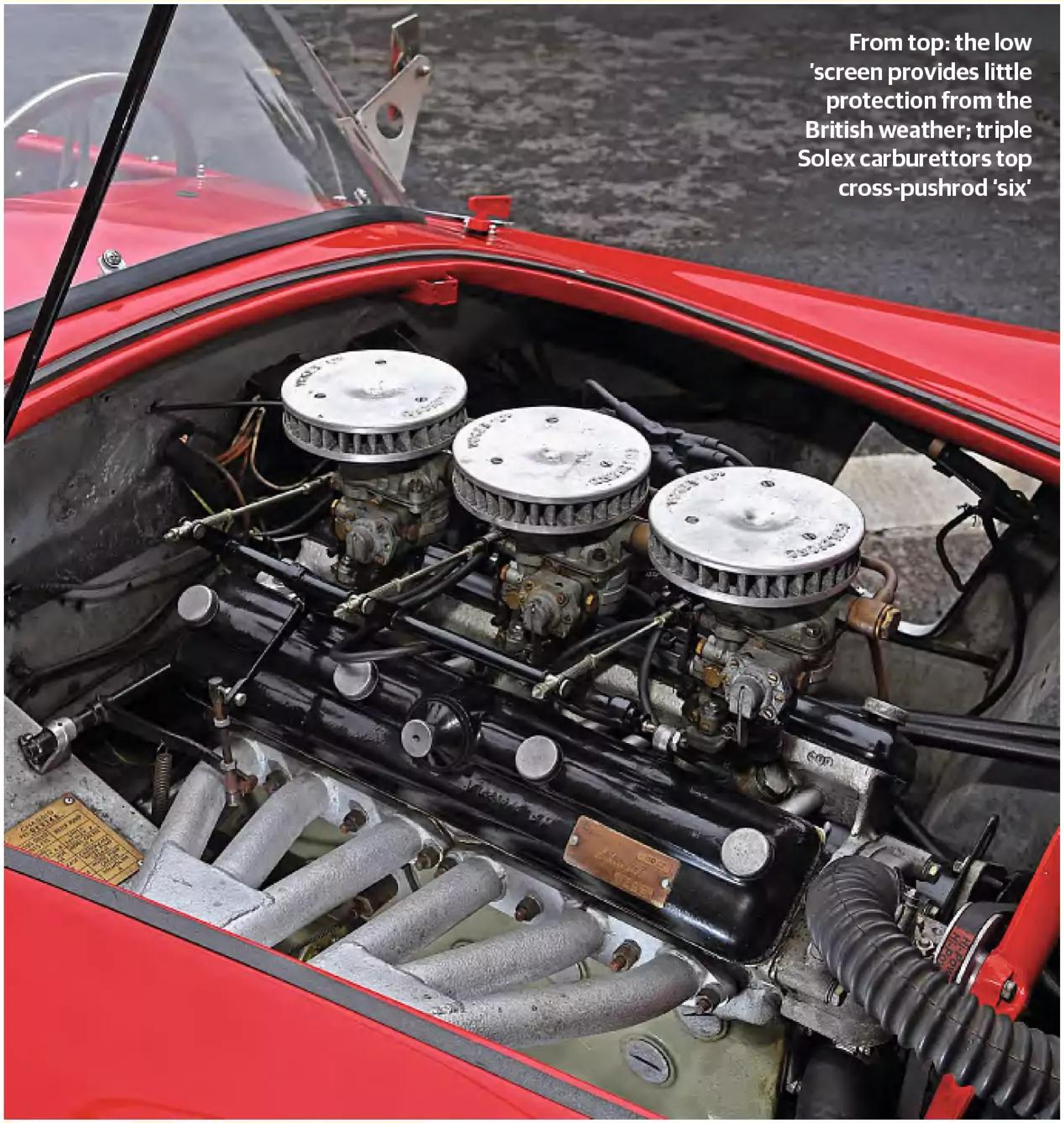
Sold new to Dr Oscar Lupi, BEX148 left the Thames Ditton factory in April 1956. Upon its arrival in Caracas, the Pentz modifications included a full undertray – hence the large wing vents to relieve underbonnet pressure – and slightly flared wheelarches, modified to accommodate wider 6.00x16in tyres in place of the standard 5.50x16s. The most obvious change, other than the lowered windscreen, was the Maserati/Ferrari-style nose, complete with faired-in headlights.

BEX148 received perhaps the prettiest rendition of a frontal treatment that, as well as improving its aerodynamics, allowed the little British roadster to look perfectly at home among the considerably beefier opposition. The restyling also made the Pentz Ace a foot longer than the standard item.

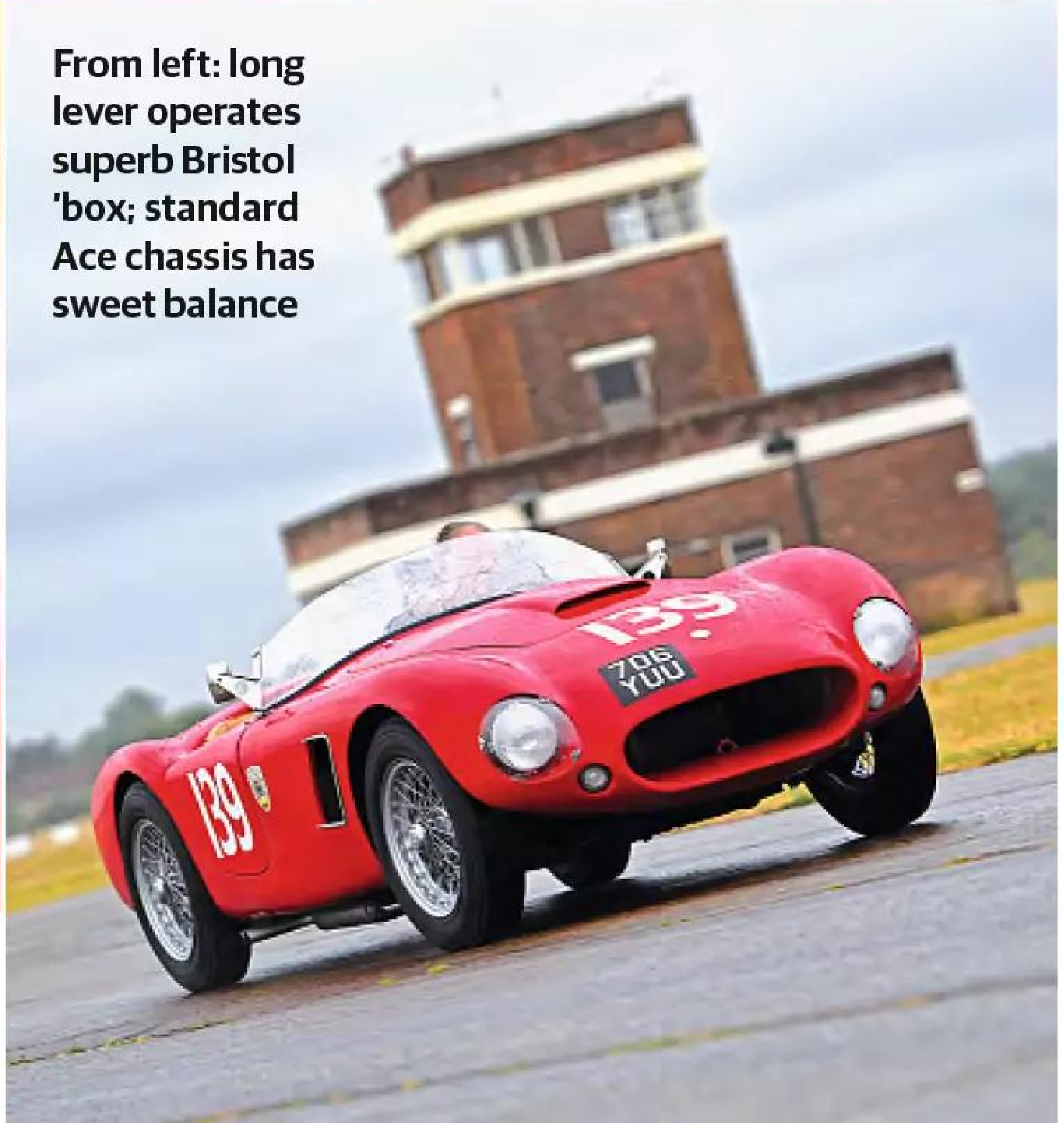
'As well as improving its aerodynamics, the new nose allowed the little roadster to look at home among beefier opposition'

Dr Lupi appears to have been active from the start with BEX148, managing fourth place in the under-2-litre class at the Estado Carabobo Trophy, held in Valencia in 1956, and ninth at the 1957 La Montana Hill Climb alongside the Aces of Fernández and Fredy Brandt.

Painted red and always wearing the number 139, it was often to be seen mixing it with much faster, purpose-built sports-racing cars: one image shows Lupi jostling for position with at least eight Ferraris. The Trofeo Shell – La Trinidad was a big meet in Venezuela that featured a main Formule Libre race along with class events. Lupi and his Ace came seventh in 1958 and second in 1959. After another seventh, this time on the Vuelta de Aragua in 1960, Lupi took delivery of a new Ace Bristol and BEX148 was, apparently, retired. It then moved between two local Venezuelan owners who used it as a road car before going into long-term storage in the 1990s.



From top: the low 'screen provides little protection from the British weather; triple Solex carburettors top cross-pushrod 'six'



From left: long lever operates superb Bristol 'box; standard Ace chassis has sweet balance

When Tim Isles, the AC Owners' Club's registrar for the model, found BEX148 some 20 years ago, it needed, in his words, "a bit of help". Along with marque specialist Nigel Winchester, who oversaw the restoration, Tim was determined to reuse every original component he could and to maintain the distinctive Pentz modifications.

BEX148 was ready to race again in time for the Fordwater Trophy at the 2013 Goodwood Revival, and it was Nigel himself – clearly a handy driver – who brought the car home well ahead of the other Aces in the race. After that the car stayed with Tim in Yorkshire for several years, but it has recently been sold to a collector in Germany by Pendine, based at Bicester Heritage and which is becoming something of an AC specialist.

The standard Ace looks so correct from every possible angle that it's hard to view modifications to its graceful profile as anything other than lily-gilding, although the lower nose must have reduced the frontal area to get an (unspecified) higher maximum speed.

Hopping in through the dinky cutaway doors, you immediately sense that you 'wear' the close-fitting but comfortable Ace. Its movements are regulated through smooth-acting floor-hinged pedals and a man-sized steering wheel that gives lighter and more direct control than its imposing diameter might suggest. The cranked gearlever appears to promise ponderous changes, but it is the Bristol gearbox that came with the engine, which means you can whip it around its well-defined gate with a nifty precision that is more firearm than automobile in its action.

The crisp and fruity, BMW-derived Bristol straight-six – a handsome engine but one that looks half lost in its spacious quarters – has hemispherical cylinder heads and triple Solex carburettors for a full-bodied bark that is exactly equal to its considerable bite. It is fussy-sounding but never less than expensively well-bred in tone, pulling smoothly and evenly from 2500rpm but feeling at its strongest from 4500rpm, where most other 'sixes' of its era were running out of breath. If they were willing to fit colder plugs and richer jets, competition-minded owners could get the full benefit of 6000rpm change-up points that gave a 70mph second gear and a near-100mph third.

The suspension, set up on the hard side of firm but not in a way that rattles the fillings, adds to your confidence in the total stability of the Ace, with its roll-free cornering and neutral steering. It does not require huge amounts of physical or mental effort to put it where you want it on the road, and you guide the car with ease, its steering lightening with speed and adding near-instinctive precision.

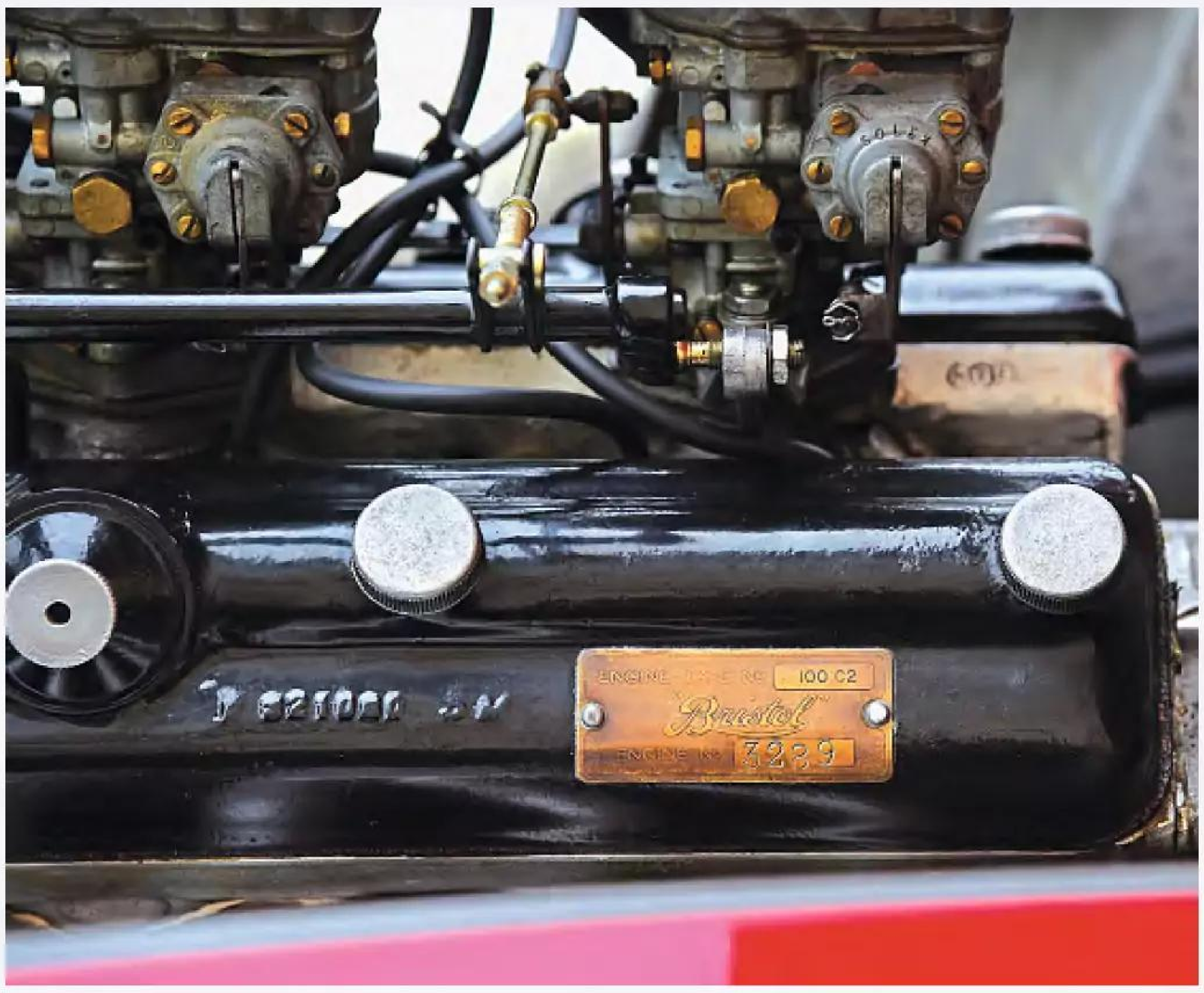
There was probably nothing to touch the Bristol-engined Ace in the world of showroom-available 'pure' sports cars in the second half of the 1950s. It's very easy to see the attraction for buyers such as Dr Lupi: here was a road-friendly, 120mph, 20mpg two-seater that gave well-heeled, competent drivers who couldn't stretch to a Ferrari or a Maserati a good chance of track success simply by turning up.

As for what happened to Dr Lupi – well, I'm afraid I can't tell you; likewise Pentz or even Fernández. Their fates are as obscure as those of the sister cars to BEX148. Izquierdo's Ace, BEX149, has not been heard of since the middle of the 1960s. Arguably the least attractive of the Pentz-modified cars, it was much campaigned in period: after Caracas, its next outing was in Nassau for Bahamas Speed Week, but Izquierdo sold it upon his return and bought a new Ace – registered BEX460 – direct from the factory. He raced it throughout Europe that summer before shipping it home to continue competing in Colombia and Venezuela in late 1958 and '59. That car still exists, in excellent condition, in a collection in Colombia.

Ottolina's Ace was replaced immediately after the Caracas 1000, when he upgraded to a Maserati 200S that ended up as a V8-engined drag car before being scrapped in the '80s. The fate of its first owner was equally grim. As well as an ex-crooner and talkshow host, Ottolina was a 'man of the people' 1978 presidential candidate who died in a plane crash shortly before that year's election. If you thought motor racing was a dangerous sport in Venezuela, it was often safer than politics.

Thanks to *Pendine (pendine.com); Tim Isles*

'The crisp and fruity "six" has hemi heads and triple carbs for a full-bodied bark that is exactly equal to its considerable bite'



Sensational Bristol engine, here in C2 spec, perfectly suits the character of the lithe and focused Ace – and it has more than enough power to loosen the tail (below)

PENTZ AC ACE BRISTOL

Sold/number built 1957/three
Construction tubular steel chassis, aluminium body
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, ohv 1971cc straight-six, triple downdraught Solex carburettors
Max power 128bhp @ 5750rpm (up to 170bhp in race tune)
Max torque 128lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by upper transverse leaf spring, lower wishbones, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering Bishop cam steering box
Brakes Alfin drums
Length 13ft 8in (4165mm)
Width 4ft 11in (1499mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2290mm)
Weight 1793lb (813kg)
0-60mph 8.7 secs
Top speed 121mph **Mpg** 18-27
Price new £2165

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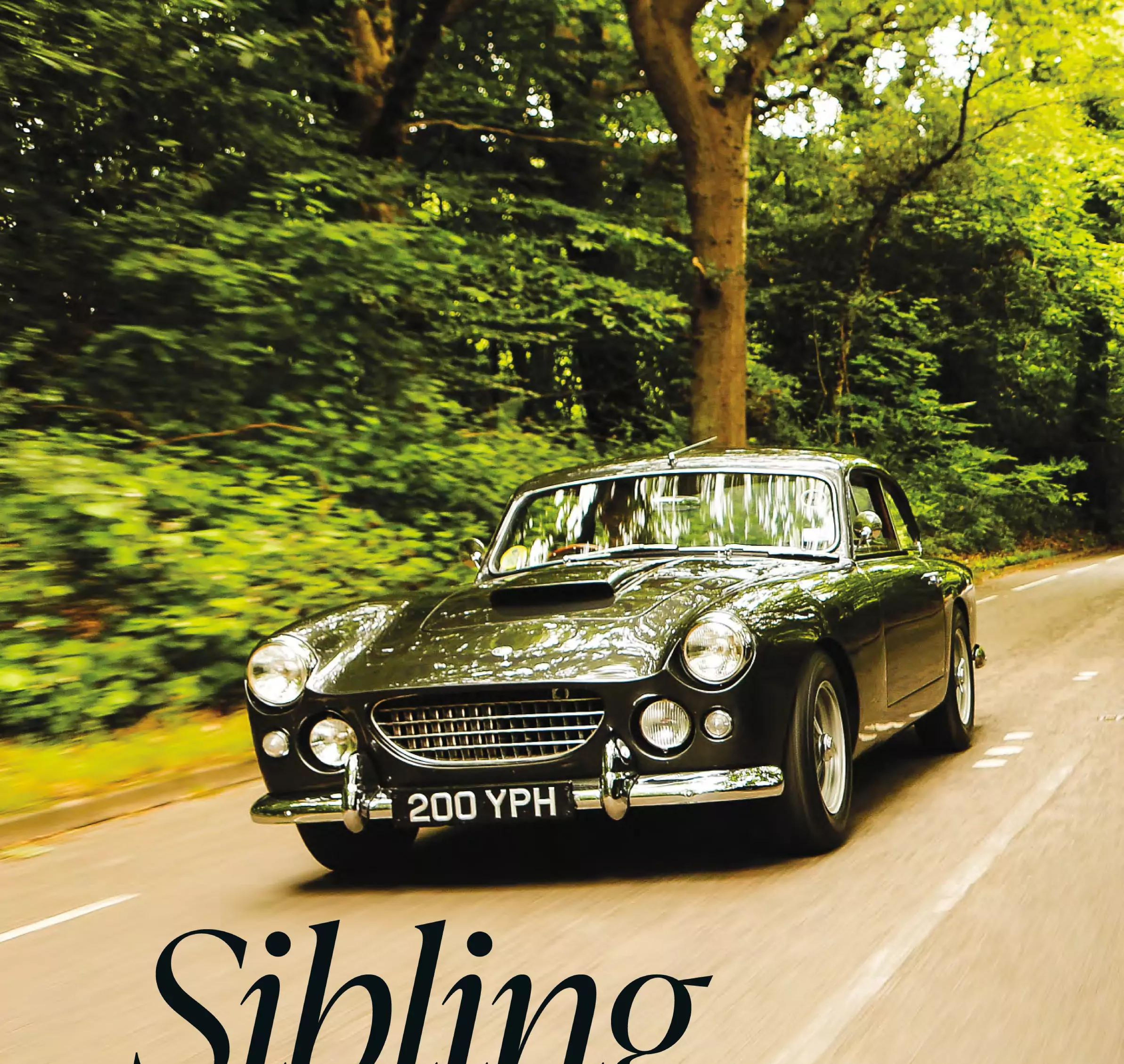


Sibling REVELRY

The smartly styled, 2+2 AC Greyhound has long lived in the shadow of the more sporting Aceca, so how do they compare today?

WORDS **JAMES PAGE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

305 YUE

Between the end of WW2 and Carroll Shelby ensuring that, for the wider public at least, AC would forever mean Cobra, the Thames Ditton firm produced a brilliantly distinctive range of cars. As the 1960s dawned, customers could choose between a fabulous roadster in the unforgettable shape of the Ace, a hugely capable GT in the Aceca, and a sporting but practical 2+2 in the Greyhound. The open car, of course, remains by far the most celebrated of the three, but the charismatic closed models deserve their share of the limelight.

The Greyhound was the spiritual successor to the 2 Litre, and while their respective launches were separated by not much more than a decade, AC had packed an awful lot into the intervening years. With a chassis based on a pre-war Jaguar design and an in-house engine that could trace its roots back to 1919, the charming 2 Litre played a vital role in re-establishing car production at AC following hostilities. By the early 1950s, however, its price had crept over the £1000 mark, which meant a steep rise in Purchase Tax, and in any case the company's focus had shifted elsewhere.

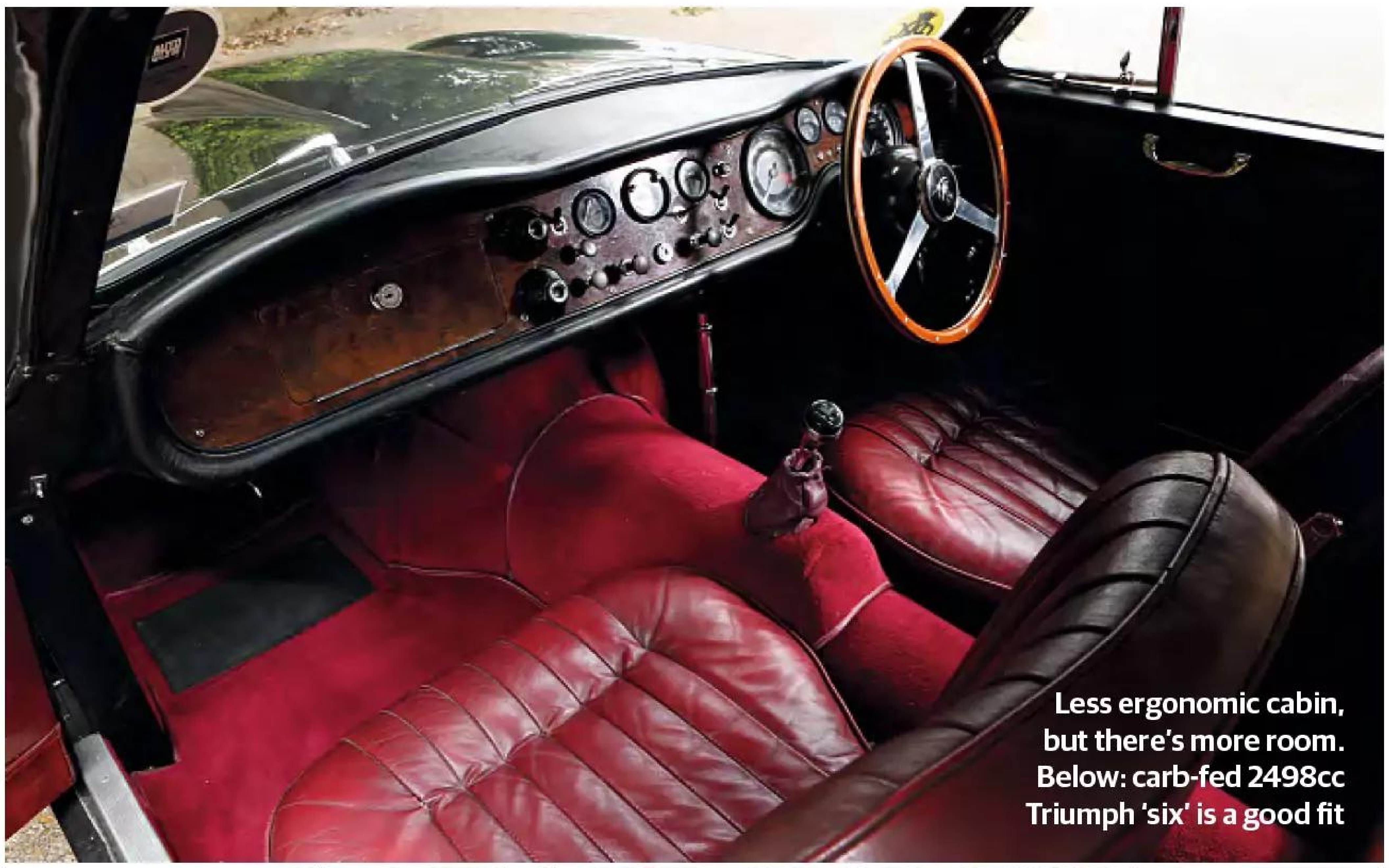
In 1953 it launched the Ace. By equipping a roadgoing derivative of John Tojeiro's beautiful little sports-racer with an uprated version of the 2 Litre's six-cylinder engine, AC created a design for the ages. And then the following year it made an attractive GT out of the roadster by introducing the Aceca, with both models representing an extreme departure from the 2 Litre in terms of styling and engineering.

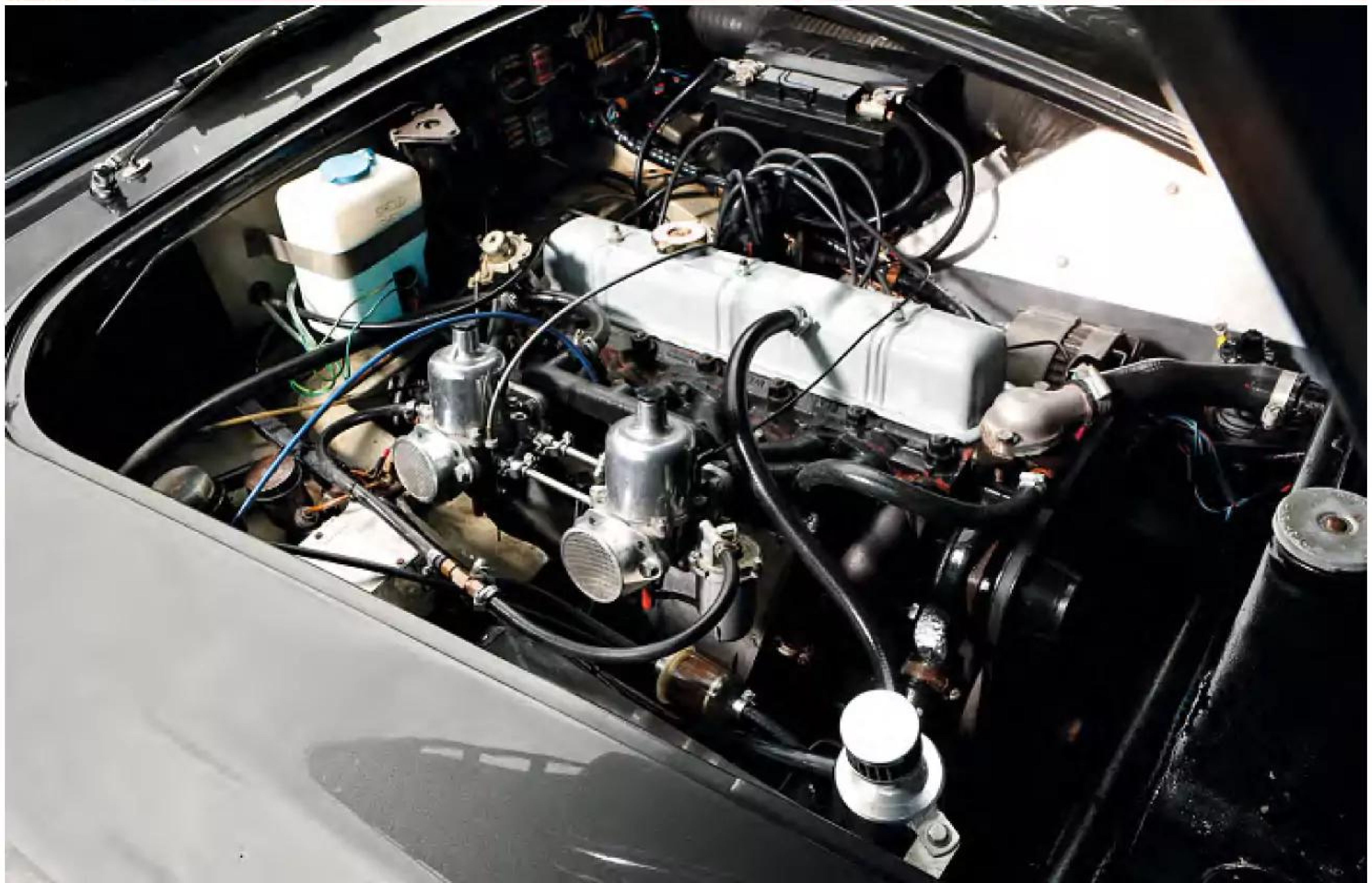
But while the Aceca satisfied perfectly the needs of the more refined clientele who desired an Ace but wanted to have a roof over their heads – or, as *The Autocar* put it, a buyer 'who sometimes needs to arrive unruffled at a formal occasion' – it was still strictly a two-seater. Production of the 2 Litre trickled on until 1956, after which time it would take three years for the Hurlock family to present a new take on the four-seater theme.

The Greyhound prototype was first shown at the 1959 Earls Court Motor Show and employed a lengthened Aceca chassis with bodywork that was styled by chief engineer Alan Turner. For production cars, which started to appear the following year, there was a stronger, square-section chassis in addition to a facelift that encompassed restyled rear windows and a smoother nose. Also, the spotlights moved from being within the grille – an upturned Ace item – to either side of it, and there was a stronger frame to support the aluminium body.

The increase in size over the Aceca – it's 10in longer and 4in wider – is instantly noticeable when you see the two next to each other, but it has an impressive stance and plenty of presence. In profile you notice the squarer waistline and shallower slope to the large rear 'screen. Wander around the back, and from

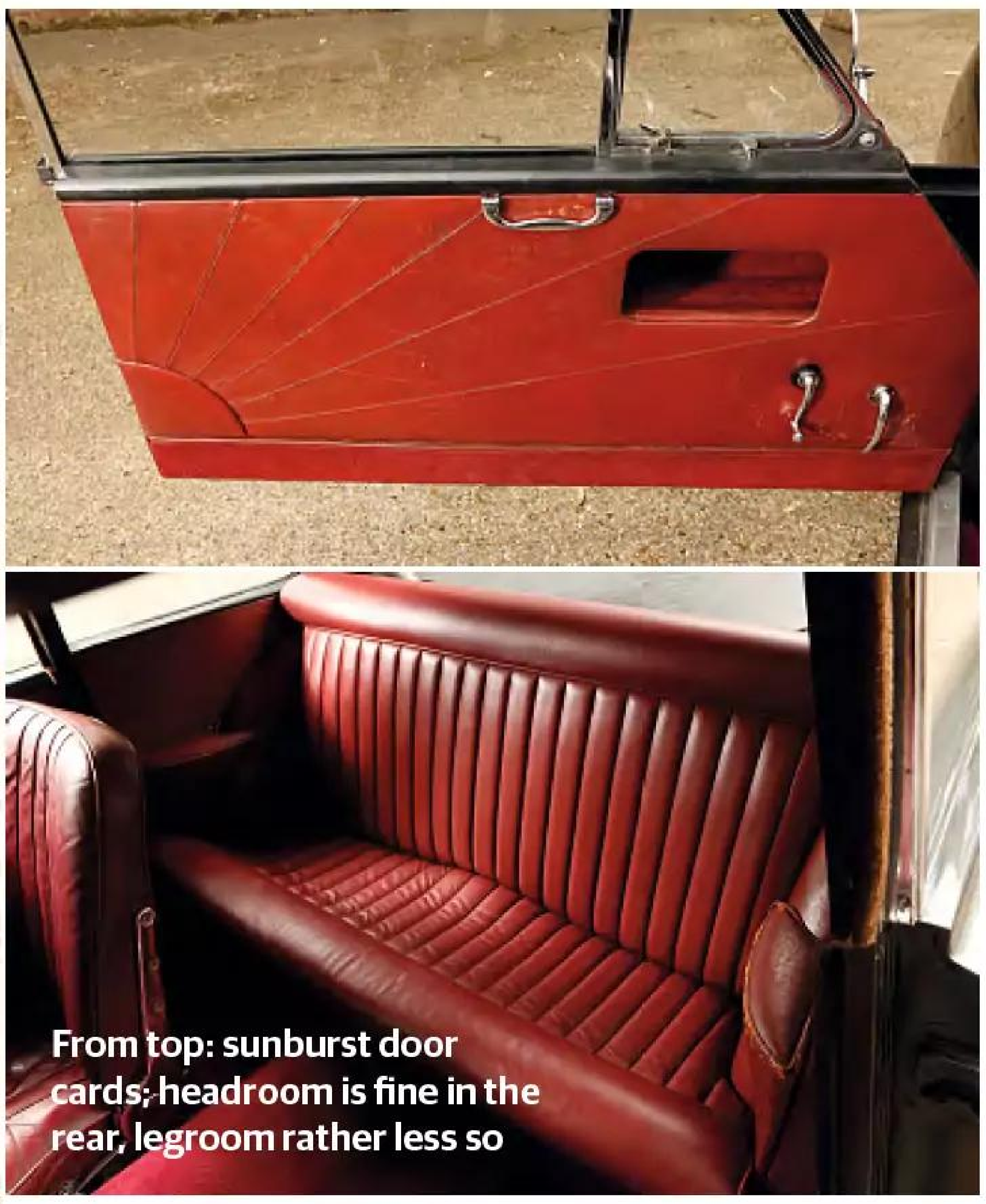
'The Greyhound is a very different proposition to the curvaceous Aceca'





Less ergonomic cabin, but there's more room. Below: carb-fed 2498cc Triumph 'six' is a good fit

Nose was restyled after the prototype's motor show debut



From top: sunburst door cards; headroom is fine in the rear, legroom rather less so

a three-quarter angle it carries particularly strong echoes of the Aston Martin DB4.

Not everyone is a fan of the Greyhound's looks. A certain Martin Buckley wrote – a long time ago, admittedly – that: 'At best, the fastback shape lacked harmony. At worst it was an unforgiveably clumsy piece of work from an outfit that had given us such great-looking machines as the Ace and Aceca.'

It's certainly a very different proposition from the more compact and curvaceous Aceca, which boasts a timeless beauty few cars can match. The featured example looks particularly good minus its bumpers, even if the overriders would do little to protect the rear wings.

In the metal, however, the Greyhound's lines come together far better than they sometimes do in photographs. I like it. Seeing it with its two-seater stablemate, it's almost difficult to believe they were sold alongside each other for three years. In period, it would have represented a far more contemporary offering than the Aceca. It was a design for the 1960s, rather than one that, however gorgeous, was definitely a product of the previous decade.

The featured Greyhound belongs to Reginald Warlop. He has a varied car-owning past that includes an MGB – "It rusted *everywhere*" – and even a Pembleton three-wheeler, but he says he's always had a soft spot for the Thames Ditton marque: "I love ACs, and particularly Cobras. I like to draw, and when I was 16 I was always sketching Cobras. And Lamborghini Miuras! I've always been into ACs, though, so I liked the Greyhound, but I'd only previously seen one at Goodwood. I was drawn to its structure, design and light weight – an Aston, for example, would have been much heavier.

"I bought it in 2013 without having seen it. It had ended up in Sweden and needed to be recommissioned. It was ideal for the kids because we could all go to shows in it. In fact, as soon as the car was ready in September 2014, I took it to the Concours of Elegance at Hampton Court. I get a lot of use out of it. We will go out most weekends, and I've taken it to Knokke in Belgium, which is where I'm from. It's amazingly reliable and has let me down only once. It's great on the motorway – there's lots of space and it's comfortable, plus it has a pretty big boot, so it's a sensible touring car."

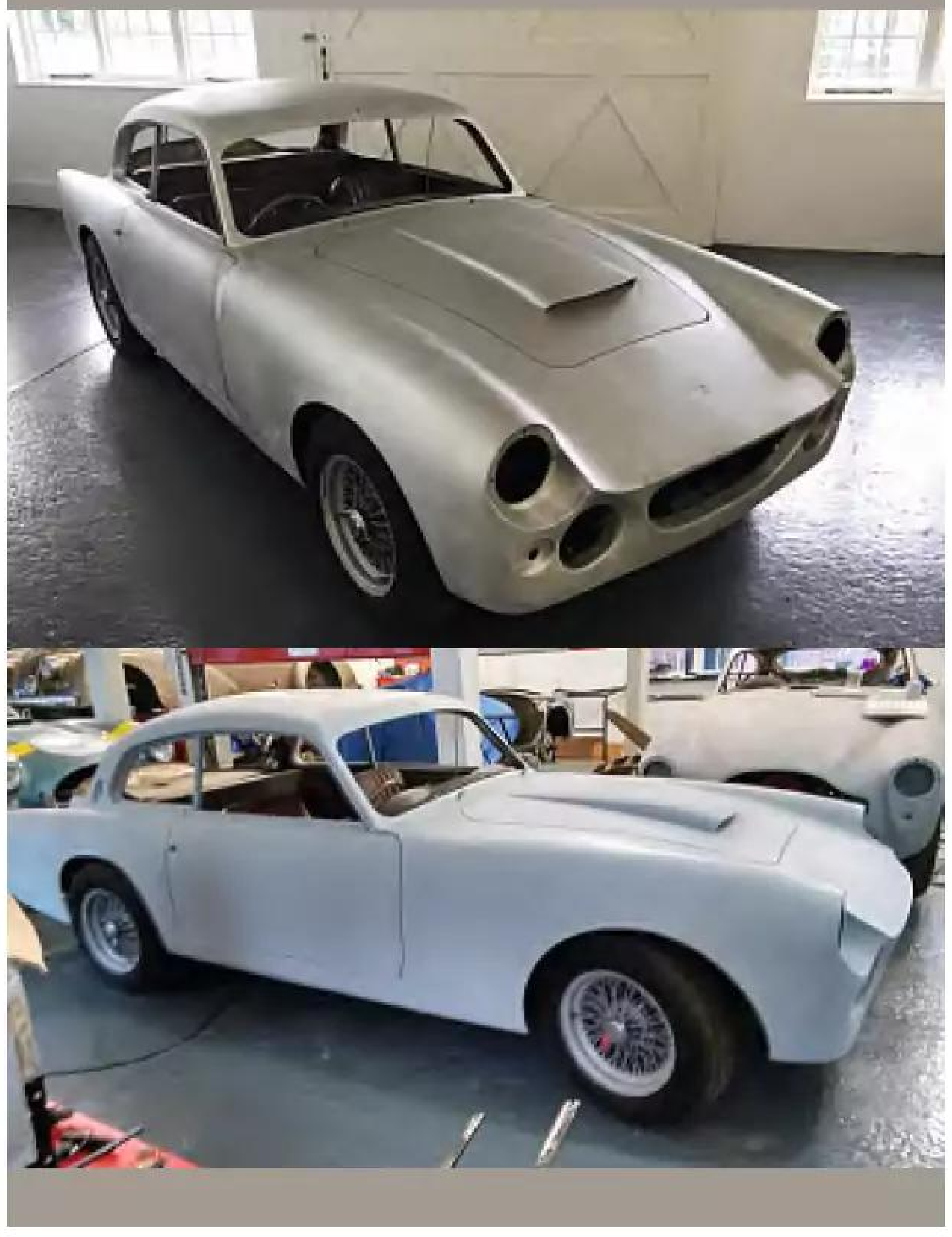
But all is not as it seems with this particular Greyhound, and to explain requires an understanding of the engines involved. Having introduced the Aceca with yet another update of its own venerable 'six' – this time with triple SU carburettors and 85bhp – AC switched to Bristol power in 1956. That arrangement lasted through to the Greyhound, with the majority of examples using either the 1971cc or 2216cc version of Filton's cross-pushrod unit.

When the supplies from Bristol dried up, a handful of later cars were fitted with AC's engine, making one final appearance and by then uprated to 105bhp. It is thought that another Greyhound was fitted with

GENTLY DOES IT

Steve Gray at Brooklands Motor Company Group was entrusted with renovating Reginald's car. "Stripping it took about 60 hours," says Steve, "and it was then masked and very lightly media-blasted. Abrading that bodywork with anything other than a stainless-steel wire wheel and an orbital sander using a soft interface pad will cause heat distortion, along with possible contamination and delamination around the edges. We use a wet strip and then media, because the 16swg body can be 18swg or 20swg in places, and it will appear like lace when it's corroded."

With Greyhounds that have lost their original engines, Steve usually tries to source the correct type. "The 2.2-litre unit is still available from old Bristols that are beyond salvation," he explains. "However, if you are thinking of buying a Greyhound or an Aceca, the bodywork is the major area of expenditure."

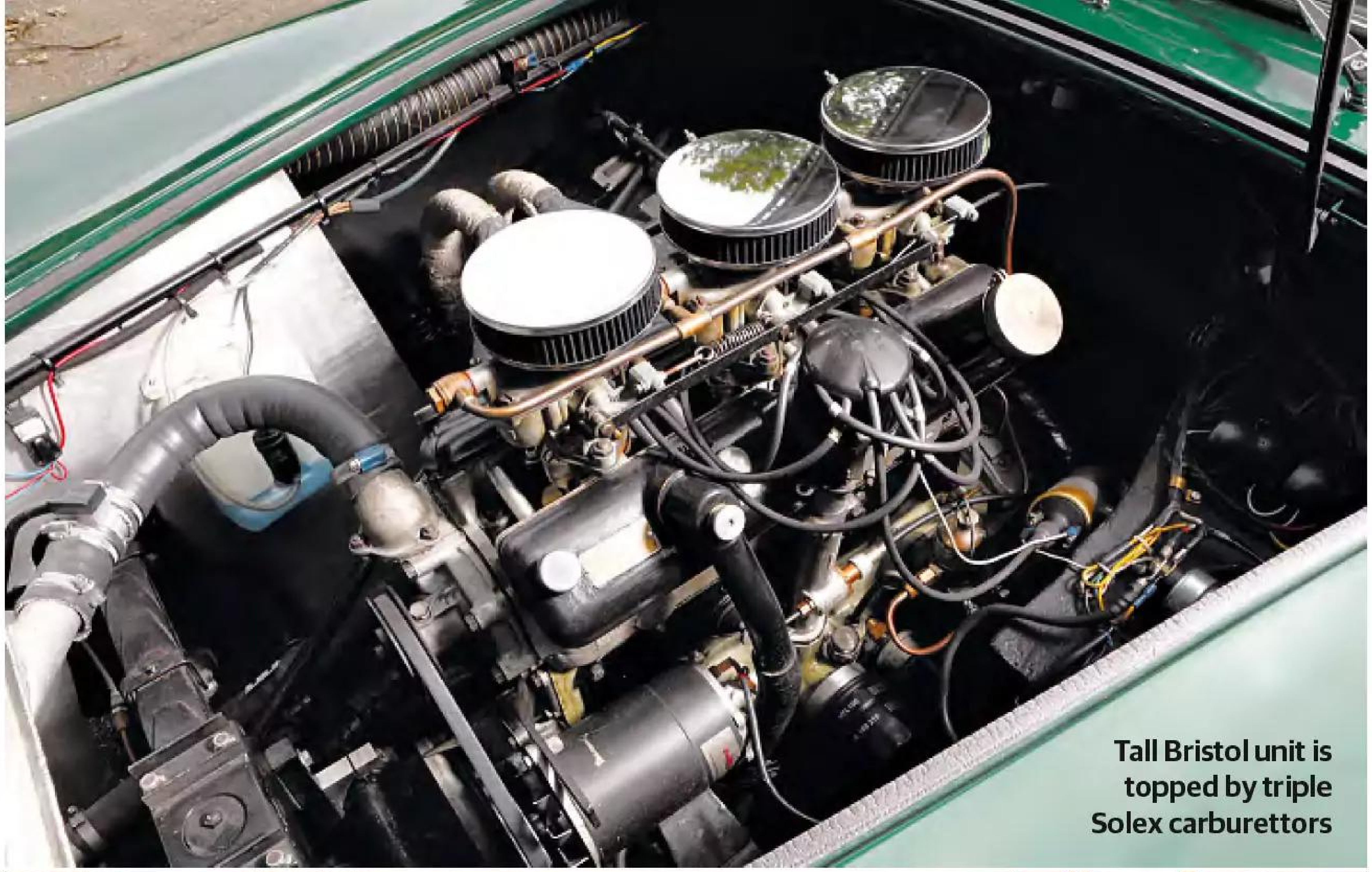


an experimental flat-six engine, but that never got past the prototype phase. There was also talk of fitting a V8 – either Edward Turner's little Daimler unit or the all-alloy, Buick-derived Rover powerplant.

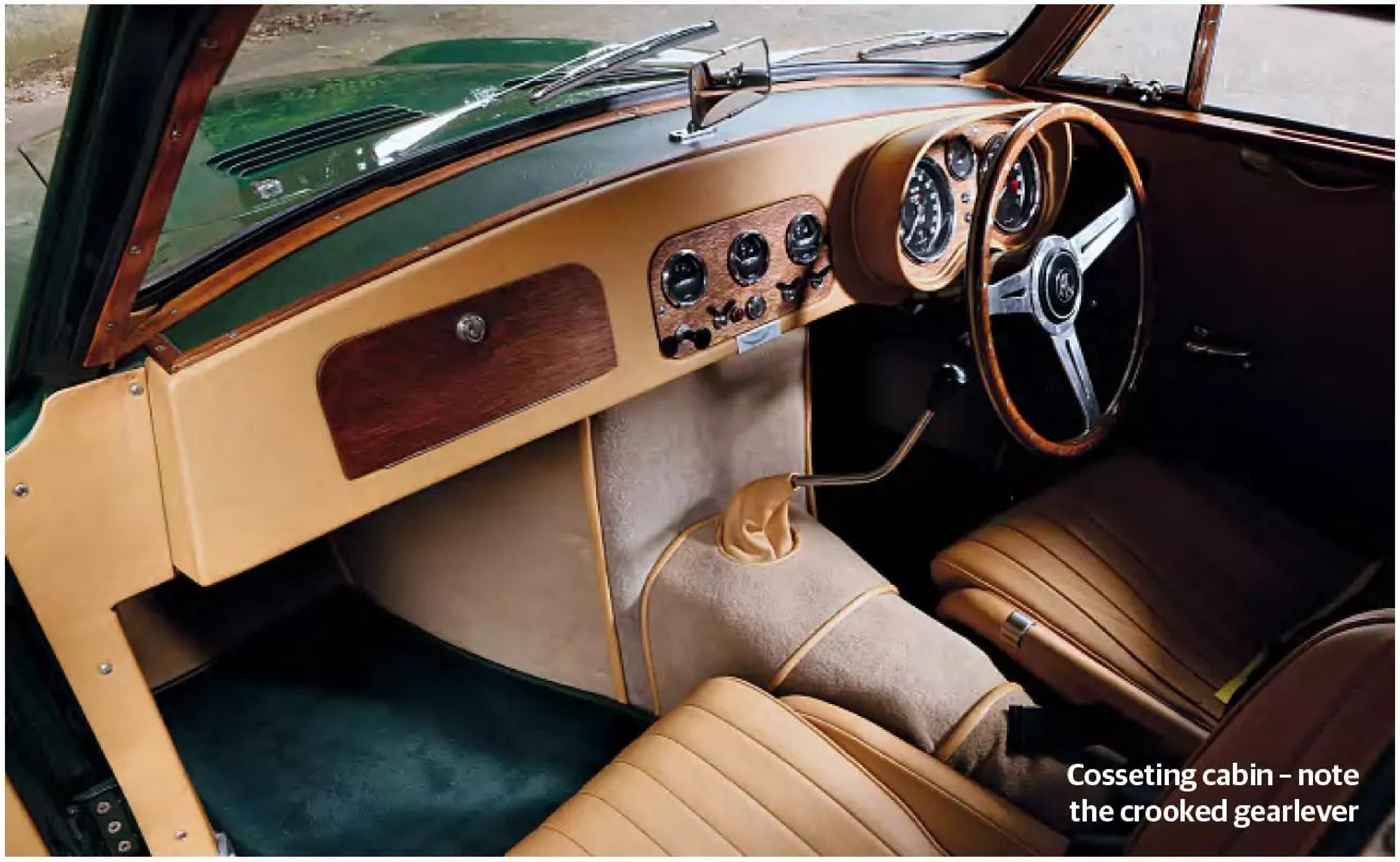
As it was, production came to a halt in 1963 after only 84 cars had been built – the Ace and Aceca were discontinued at the same time. With Greyhounds then slipping out of fashion for a number of years, people would seek them out solely for their Bristol engines – the 1971cc 100D2 was particularly desirable. Once that had been plundered for the benefit of an Ace, Aceca, Frazer Nash or whatever, the remains would be sold on and often fitted with a more affordable and available drivetrain, which at least enabled the car itself to survive.

"Greyhounds were losing their engines at a time when they were seriously under-appreciated and their engines were worth more than the cars," explains John Goose, AC Owners' Club stalwart and Greyhound custodian. "Happily, this has now changed. They're now becoming more appreciated and more valuable. This means that they are less likely to be cannibalised, and restoration costs, which can be very high with all that aluminium bodywork, become financially justifiable."

Many Greyhounds had already suffered that fate, however, and in the case of Reginald's car there's an instant giveaway without even having to open the bonnet: in place of the standard-issue gearknob is an unmistakably Triumph item, complete with overdrive switch.



Tall Bristol unit is topped by triple Solex carburettors



Cosseting cabin – note the crooked gearlever

'The speed and noise add up to make driving a really good Aceca an unforgettable and truly intoxicating experience'.

Aceca's wonderful lines are best showed off in profile. Above right: recess for rear numberplate; simple binnacle for the major instruments

"I need to find another gearknob, really," he says with a smile. "Maybe I'll just make one!"

John confirms that the Triumph straight-six is the easiest replacement. "It's the right period and drops in without having to alter the engine bay very much," he explains. "A couple of cars have been fitted with Ford's 2.6-litre unit – in fact, the factory made a prototype using that engine when Bristol was moving over to V8 power and AC had to look elsewhere. There are a couple in the USA with Ford V8s, too, but I would have thought that's rather heavy for a relatively lightweight car."

In fact, John himself knows the benefits of owning a 'hybrid' Greyhound: "I have the prototype/first production example fitted with a Bristol 100D2 unit. I love it dearly, but I always wondered how it would be with twice the litres and horses. When an engineless car became available, I grabbed the chance and installed a Rover V8 with a nice camshaft and four-choke Weber carburettor. It's wonderful. The chassis is well able to cope with V8 power."

In the meantime, Reginald has been posting on a Bristol forum in an attempt to track down the car's original powerplant – 100D2 number 1129, which these days is apparently fitted to an Ace – but for now, he says, he's delighted with the Canley-sourced replacement: "I can go flat-out and drive it for long distances without worrying about something expensive going wrong. It's in the spirit of the car, too: a British 'six'. It's not like putting a Pinto in a Ferrari."

He may have refurbished his Greyhound, but Reginald wisely left the interior alone. The original trim has a fabulous patina, from the handsome sunburst doorcards to the leather seats and carpets. The dash is slightly random, with some unlabelled rocker switches and plenty of auxiliary dials, while the ventilation controls are a stretch away to the left.

At just 5ft 7in, I'm able to get relatively comfortable once I've climbed into the rear seats, even if legroom is marginal. "If there was a fault with the Greyhound," Alan Turner told *C&SC* in 1991, "it was that the space was a little bit generous for a 2+2. So, in many people's eyes, it was a four-seater with cramped rear seats, rather than the original conception of a 2+2 with generous seating for children. It fell between two stools."

The Aceca boasts a much more ordered dashboard. Although the steering wheel is similarly vertical in both cars, the driving position does feel a little more dated in the earlier model, with that wheel resting in your lap and a gearlever that is bent through various angles on its way out of the transmission tunnel. Even so, with its mixture of leather and wood, it's a very pleasing cockpit in which you feel nicely cocooned.

Beneath the metal, the Greyhound received various mechanical upgrades over the Aceca. Whereas the earlier car had a transverse leaf spring at either end plus cam-and-peg steering, the four-seater revelled in wishbones all round with coil springs and telescopic dampers. There was new rack-and-pinion steering, too.

305 YUE
200 YPH

Compact 'hatchback' versus Aston-esque saloon; larger Greyhound has a squarer profile

That translates into sharper reactions than the Aceca's, especially around the straight-ahead, with the Greyhound turning in well and changing direction keenly. The Triumph engine in Reginald's car has impressive low-down torque, too. It responds instantly and suits the car well, even if the engine note is more gruff than the crisp, cultured bark that the Bristol unit produces once you start motoring on.

This Aceca's 'six' has been upgraded to an ex-Arnolt-Bristol powerplant, and once you've explored the lengthy throttle travel the acceleration is impressive and thoroughly addictive. The rev counter is redlined at 5500rpm, but in truth you don't need to venture far beyond 4000rpm to make swift progress. The Bristol gearchange, too, is wonderful, a mechanical and precise movement that the slightly woolly Triumph shift in Reginald's Greyhound can't match.

The speed – from a standstill, 60mph comes up in about 10 secs – 'feel' and spine-tingling noise, which reverberates around the compact cabin, add up to make driving a really good Aceca an unforgettable and intoxicating experience. Despite its attempts to be a more refined option than the Ace, it is still first and foremost a sports car. Yet, despite what some reports over the years would have you believe, the Greyhound is by no means overshadowed. It's less overtly sporting than the two-seater car, but it had an even more luxurious and practical brief to fulfil. It handles precisely, stops well, with its combination of discs up front (an option on the Aceca from 1957) and drums at the rear, and, on 185HR15 radials, feels nicely composed.

"Towards the end of its development," said Turner, "a car was road-tested by *The Motor*, much against my will because I didn't think it had the right wheels or tyres. The road test reported it had a tendency to wander at speed, which we believed was caused by the 15in wheels and crossplies that were fitted. I think the car was spoiled for many by that article."

Mud sticks, and then there was its cost. As John points out, for the asking price of £3185 – an Aceca Bristol was £2561 – you could have bought a Jaguar plus a couple of Minis. Its low profile counted against it, too. In later years, when most people thought of AC they pictured a Cobra or an Ace. If they thought of a closed AC, it was an Aceca, and even though prices for that car are now firmly into six-figure territory, it seems absurd that you can still buy a good one plus a Greyhound for much less than a single Aston Martin DB2/4.

It's a shame Greyhound production stopped when it did and that the car didn't have the chance to compete for longer with rivals from the likes of Aston Martin, Jensen and Alvis. It's fascinating to think of it fitted with a lightweight V8, possibly forming the basis for the next generation of ACs, but the 2+2 deserves its place alongside the illustrious Aceca.

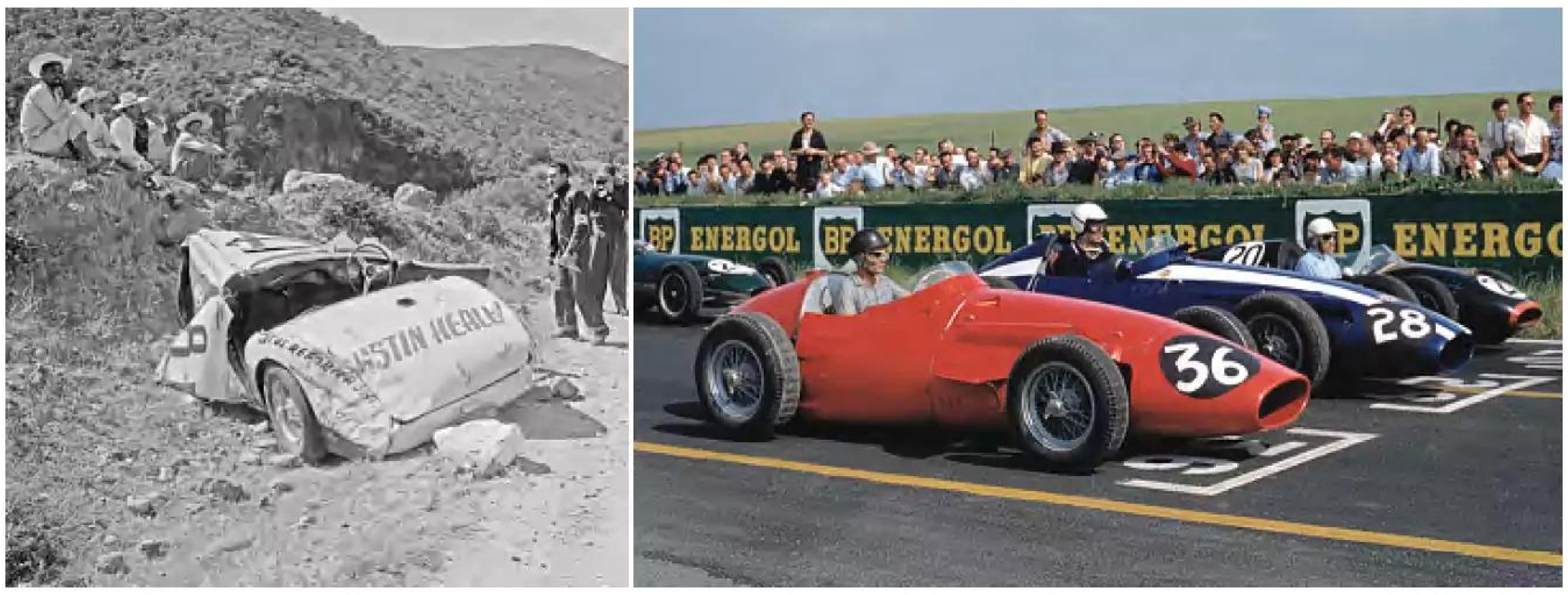
"I have no intention of selling it," concludes Reginald. "Once you have a car like this, there's no need to buy another one."

Thanks to *Brooklands Motor Company Group (acheritage.com); Brooklands Museum (brooklandsmuseum.com); AC Owners' Club (acownersclub.co.uk)*

Carroll sings

Carroll Shelby's career is the stuff of automotive legend. Racing's red hot chilli prepper gives the inside line

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **SIMON CLAY/GETTY**



After crashing out of the '54 Carrera Panamericana; '58 French GP grid at Reims, between Hill and Salvadori

One of the highlights of American sports car racing in the mid-'50s was Carroll Shelby's association with the 'Kingfish Engineer' John Edgar. The fabulously wealthy sportsman supplied several big-banger sports cars, including an ex-Juan Manuel Fangio Ferrari 410 and a Maserati 450S, for the tall Texan to pedal to an impressive run of results through 1956 and 1957. The no-expense-spared equipe included a 100mph transporter and an unlimited party budget. Carroll's wide, winning smile fitted well with Edgar's dazzling, boozy lifestyle, and the two became firm friends.

"John was heir to the Hobart fortune and raced hydroplanes before the war," recalls Carroll. "He was quick, but had a few big accidents." Carroll never forgot his old team boss and continued to visit Edgar, by then teetotal, in his Beverly Hills retreat until cancer took him in 1972. The two shared some fantastic memories. When Carroll and Jan Harrison got married, Edgar drove them to Tijuana in his Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, serving Champagne and caviar *en route*.

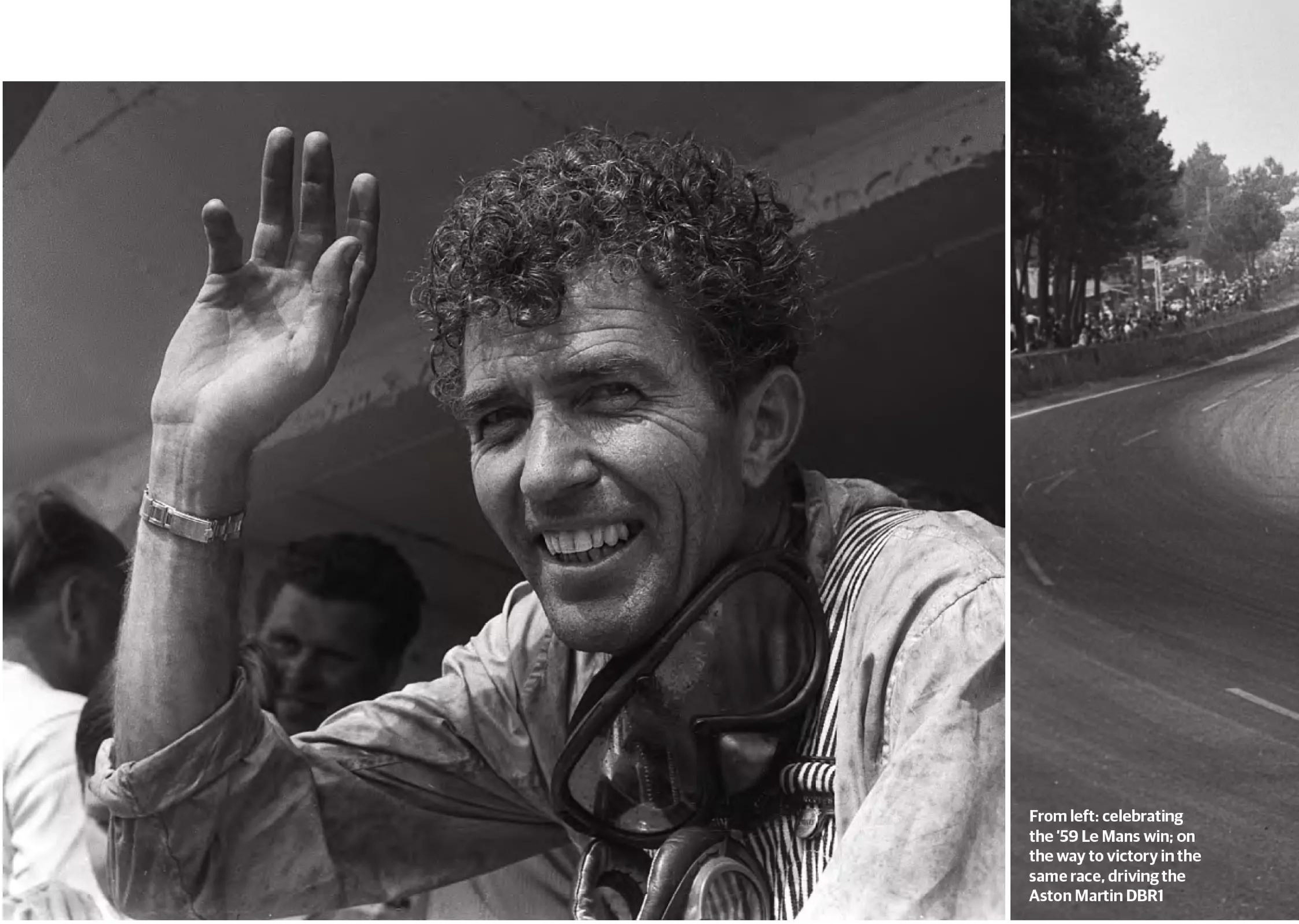
Some, such as Phil Hill, distrusted Edgar for his drinking habit, but Carroll loved every minute of those wild years. 'In New York they took suites at The Plaza, sped cars off to Hawaii, Nassau and Cuba, cooked chilli in Hollywood and laughed everywhere,' recalled Edgar's son, William, in *American Sports Car Racing in the 1950s*. Despite the partying, Carroll took some impressive wins in "those big hawgs". The sight of the Texan wrestling with these monster Italian exotics around the sun-baked Riverside and Palm Springs tracks was legendary.

Racing was in Carroll's blood from an early age. Born in east Texas in 1923 and raised in Dallas, his love for fast cars came from his father, Warren Hall Shelby, a mail carrier who regularly took his son, along with best buddy Ed Wilkins, to local circuits. "The sight of a bunch of backyard bombs skidding on loose dirt," remembers Carroll, "all trying to claw their way round turns under full throttle, really fired me up and made me want to be a race driver." Through jobs as diverse as chicken farming, a trucking business and being a partner in a hamburger stand, he remained determined to compete. It was his school buddy Ed who finally made it happen for the then 29-year-old. From drag-racing a Wilkins home-built special and winning an Oklahoma road race in a borrowed MG TC, Carroll was on his way. Later came impressive guest drives in Allards, including one at Fort Worth, where he first wore his trademark bib and braces – after rushing there from the chicken farm. They were cool and comfortable, and the resulting press coverage encouraged Carroll to adopt them as race gear. A major turning point came with an invite to compete in the '54 Argentine 1000km. Carroll recalls: "Dale Duncan and I finished 10th in a Cadillac-powered J2X, and Peter Collins introduced me to John Wyer, who seemed quite impressed with the way I'd driven." After a works Aston Martin outing at Sebring, Carroll, with no promises from Wyer, ventured to Europe. The high jinks started when the duo drove a DB3S from England to the Mille Miglia start. "We got stopped by the *gendarmes* for speeding," he says. "Just as they let us off Pete shouted: 'Tous les flics mangent la merde!' They were ready for us in the next village and we were lucky not to be thrown in jail." A strong second at a wet Aintree further wowed Wyer, but after a frustrating debut at Le Mans, Carroll's best finish was fifth at Monza.

In 1958 Carroll gave Europe a second chance. The results in second-string cars such as Centro Sud's outdated Maserati 250F were frustrating, but Wyer was convinced of the American's skill. The payback was wins in 1959 at Le Mans and Goodwood in the title-winning DBR1. "If you want my honest opinion about Le Mans," says Carroll, "I think it's much too long. It knocks the hell out of a driver and it knocks the hell out of a car, and I don't know what it really proves. But I wouldn't have missed 1959 for the world, despite the dysentery that hit Roy [Salvadori] and me every time we went there. Apart from fatigue, particularly at 11am, when you feel as though the race is never going to end, the closest scare I had was during my night spell. A couple of times I had to take to the grass to avoid some of those poop-poopers who never look in their mirrors. At about kilometre six on the Mulsanne, when your foot's well in, I had to get on the outside at 145mph to avoid one. In that situation you think pretty fast."

But Carroll's most amusing incident happened driving down victory lane. He says: "David Brown was as proud as a peacock and

*‘That story about seeing the name in a dream is bullsh*t. The Cobra would have succeeded whatever we called it’*



From left: celebrating the '59 Le Mans win; on the way to victory in the same race, driving the Aston Martin DBR1

changed into his tweed suit. He got in and was horrified at the oil swimming around. Then along comes this enthusiastic Frenchman who dumps Miss Europe right in his lap. That one contact was enough to smear 24 hours of oil and dirt all over his immaculate clothes. He was mad and a nervous wreck at the ceremony.

"I hadn't eaten during the race but kept going on bottles of Coke. Before I knew it, some joker tilted a magnum of Champagne into my mouth. I only had three swallows, but 15 minutes later I was drunker than a billygoat. Eventually John Bolster helped me back to the Aston shooting brake, so I could get some well-earned rest. Winning Le Mans was probably the greatest thrill I got out of racing, but it bugged me that an American car had never won, despite the valiant efforts of Briggs Cunningham." Carroll would be instrumental in putting that right when Ford triumphed seven years later.

A heart condition cut short Carroll's racing career, but even in his final year he lost none of his fire. He signed with 'Lucky' Casner's Camoradi equipe to drive a Maserati Tipo 61 Birdcage, but the two fell out after Carroll's first win for the team in the Herald Examiner Grand Prix at Riverside, which carried a $20,000 purse. The Texan secretly loaded the Birdcage on to a transporter and towed it to Dean Moon's shop, where it was held hostage until a deal was made. He says: "Lucky had Champagne taste but a beer budget, but you've got to give him credit for getting Goodyear into motorsport."

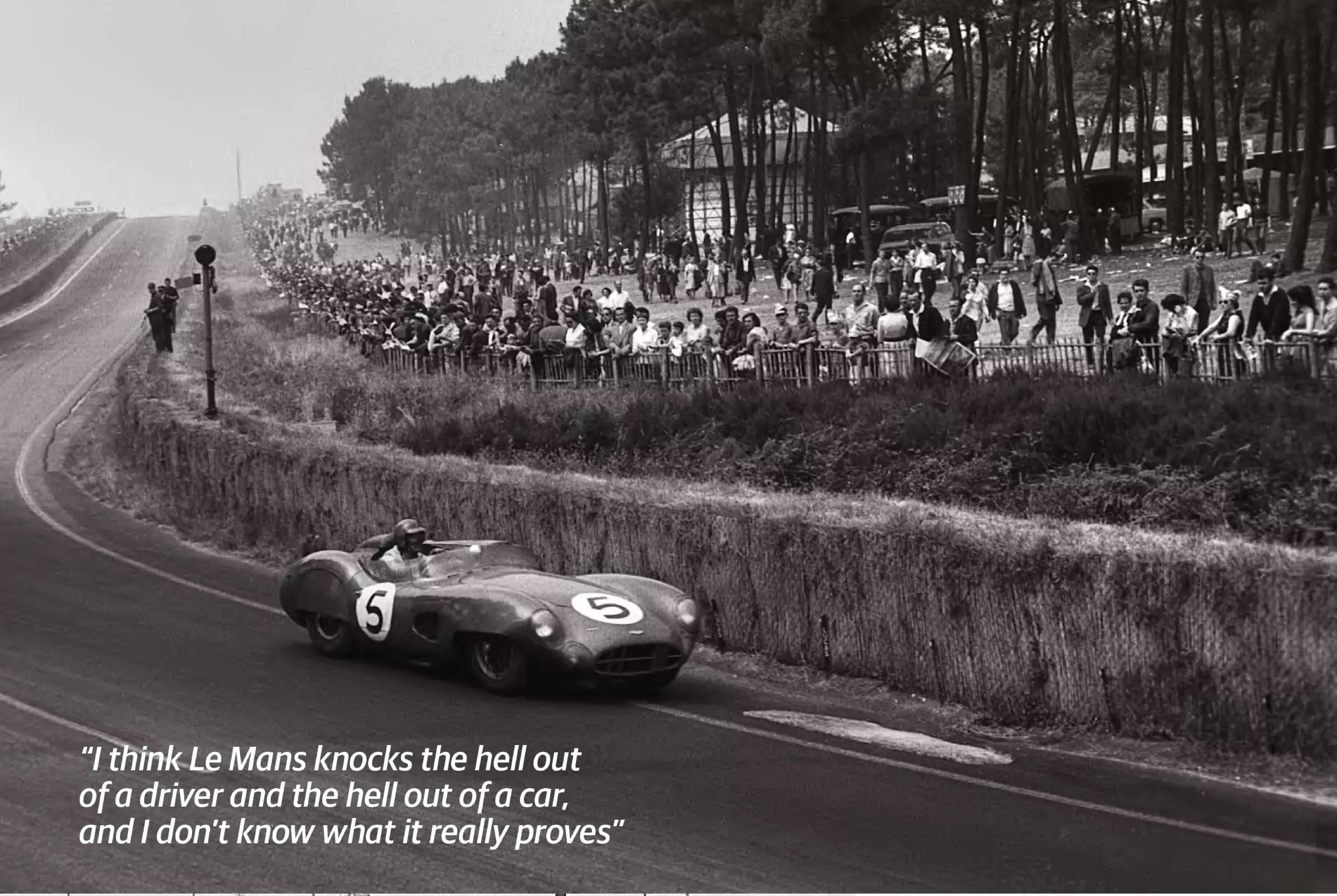
Carroll rates the demon Maser as one of the best cars he raced, saying: "It was light and as fast as a hare. It had all the scat a driver could use and the kind of roadability that many designers dream about but don't succeed in putting across. Alfieri was a brilliant engineer."

His last win came in an all-American car, the Meister Brau team's Scarab at Continental Divide, Colorado. Another victory looked in the bag at Elkhart Lake, in Max Balchowsky's legendary special Old Yeller, chalking up $50 a lap before the gearbox blew. "Max was more worried about his $40 Jag gearbox than the $10,000 prize money we'd lost," Carroll says. "That car had brutal, adhesion-busting power, but it was also perfectly tractable. The mechanics got so bored of trailering Old Yeller from California, they dropped the racer off and drove it from Iowa to Wisconsin."

By mid-season Carroll was in pain: "My angina pectoris began getting pretty rough and those pains in my chest kept coming back. The doctors insisted I should quit, but I still wanted to win the US sports-car championship and accepted Frank Harris' invite to drive his Birdcage." Carroll ended his driving career at Laguna Seca, in the final of the Pacific Grand Prix for Sports Cars: "I was up against three of the hardest pushers in the business – Stirling Moss, Augie Pabst and Billy Krause. I finished fourth. In that company you couldn't afford to be anywhere but right on your toes. And that was it. I went home, hung up my hat and quit for good. At least I still had my dream of building my own sports car."

Carroll maintains the key to success in life is taking advantage of the right opportunity. "The Cobra occurred to me when I got the news that the Bristol Aeroplane Company had stopped building engines for AC," he says. "The light, strong Ace chassis was the ideal medium for an American V8, so I airmailed a letter to Thames Ditton, suggesting we might drop a V8 into it." At the time Carroll had a Chevy, Oldsmobile or a Buick engine in mind, but Pete Brock of *Hot Rod* magazine told him about Ford's new lightweight 'thin-wall' cast-iron small-block. A lucky meeting at Pike's Peak with Dave Evans, head of Ford's stock-car racing programme, gave him a valuable 'in' at Dearborn. Charles Hurlock's favourable response over at AC encouraged Carroll to contact Evans and won a loyal convert to his sports-car dream. The result was two Fairlane engines for him to "play around with". Hot-rodder Moon's LA workshop proved the ideal place to "hop up" the new V8s, while an early 221cu in unit was shipped to AC.

The first car was ready for evaluation in February 1962. Says Carroll: "It was a hunk of dynamite, but, compared to the production Cobra, you wouldn't be far off calling it a dog. AC engineers had worked hard modifying the Ace to take the V8, but when we started hitting bumps at 135mph the trouble began. One of the main problems was the worm-and-sector steering, and the front spindles just couldn't take the performance. In the end we changed just about everything. But AC did a great job – nobody ever gives Alan Turner enough credit." Long before the prototype, CSX0001, had arrived at Santa Fe Springs, Carroll had a name for it. "When the machine was on its way from



"I think Le Mans knocks the hell out of a driver and the hell out of a car, and I don't know what it really proves"

Carroll at the wheel of an early Shelby Cobra 260 in Venice, California, on 7 October 1962

England," he says, "I had an idea about the name. That story about seeing it in a dream is bullsh*t, and the car would have succeeded whatever we called it. Crosley still had the rights, but because the company's patents had been abandoned, we were able to copyright it. It's also nonsense about the prototype being resprayed over and over. Dean Jeffries painted it yellow, and then we did it my favourite blue."

Carroll had a knack of attracting a dedicated and talented team, starting with frustrated General Motors stylist Brock, who loved the name and had the badge designed before the prototype landed from England. Amazingly, only Evans at Dearborn knew about the project at this point. Fortunately Don Frey, the head of Ford's advanced planning division, played along. "Don was a car nut and former Allard driver," says Carroll. "Thanks to him we were able to get engines out of Ford on the cuff until I could sell some cars. Charles Hurlock sportingly offered me credit on the chassis."

With Dearborn funding, the operation moved into Lance Reventlow's old Scarab workshops in Venice Beach, and a gallery of Californian high-performance specialists joined the Shelby American payroll, including Phil Remington, Lew Spencer and expat Ken Miles. There was no stopping the Texan. He finally "kicked Ferrari's ass" by winning the '65 FIA GT Championship with his Daytona Coupe, sorted the GT40, helped establish Ford and Goodyear as key players in international motorsport, developed the best-ever Mustang and advised Rootes on the Tiger. Carroll also marketed a successful chilli mix, capitalised on the '70s mag-wheel craze and revived Chrysler's performance image, doing his bit for the Viper.

After heart and kidney transplants, he turned his magic touch to charity work in the early '90s, forming the Shelby Heart Fund and Shelby Children's Foundation – as well as launching his 427 'continuation' Cobras and the Oldsmobile-powered Shelby Series 1. At 77 he still gets a kick out of beating Ferraris: his team's victory in the TT Celebration at the 2000 Goodwood Revival proved that Carroll has lost none of his burning passion to win: "Goodwood will always be important to me because Aston won the championship there in '59. We never should have beaten Ferrari, but John Wyer insisted on lots of testing and we were regularly at Goodwood. The Duke of Richmond would have us over to the house – even the mechanics – for dinner. That's why I make a big effort to get to the Revival every year."

This story was first published in C&SC in February '01. Carroll Shelby passed away in May 2012, aged 89

427

THUNDER ROAD

The Cobra has often been copied, but it has never been bettered, and few cars have engendered such desire or commanded so much respect. A brutal 427 and an earlier 289 reveal their menacing charms

WORDS **JULIAN BALME** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

My father was really responsible. On one Saturday morning, he took his seven-year-old son to Thames Ditton, a Surrey commuter village to the south-west of London, where he let him peer through the showroom windows of a modest high-street garage. The year was 1964, yet the machine with which I was confronted looked to all intents and purposes to be from the previous decade. With my nose pressed against the glass, I could see a board pinned to the wall behind the open two-seater. It claimed that I was admiring 'the world's fastest-accelerating sports car', which was also capable of more than 150mph. Like every other kid in short trousers, I was totally smitten with the AC Cobra.

It's hard to believe today, but back then there was little to satisfy the childhood lust provoked by this monstrously quick object of desire. There was no Corgi or Matchbox model; Dinky had an Aceca, but that just wasn't the same. Eventually Scalextric produced one as part of its drive to find popularity in the USA, but it was both expensive to buy and limited as a toy.

The real thing was no more plentiful on UK roads, either. Of the first-generation, leaf-sprung cars, only 47 right-hand-drive examples were produced, along with just 27 of all types of coil-sprung right-hookers. It is hardly surprising, then, that I never saw a Cobra on the street, and I only ever recall spotting one in the car park at Silverstone.

There was, however, a constant stream of black-and-white photographs in Dad's magazines. The press, particularly in the occasionally purchased American title *Car and Driver*, was ecstatic about my new favourite car. That first review recorded 0-60mph in a sneeze over 4 secs and the magic ton in under 10½. Not even James Bond had a car that fast.

A few years later, colour pictures of a Cobra graced my bedroom wall, by which time the car, equipped with an even larger V8, looked more aggressive. Flanked by huge exhaust pipes and shod with vast tyres, it was even faster, too: 0-100mph in 8.8 secs. What more could a kid possibly want from a car?

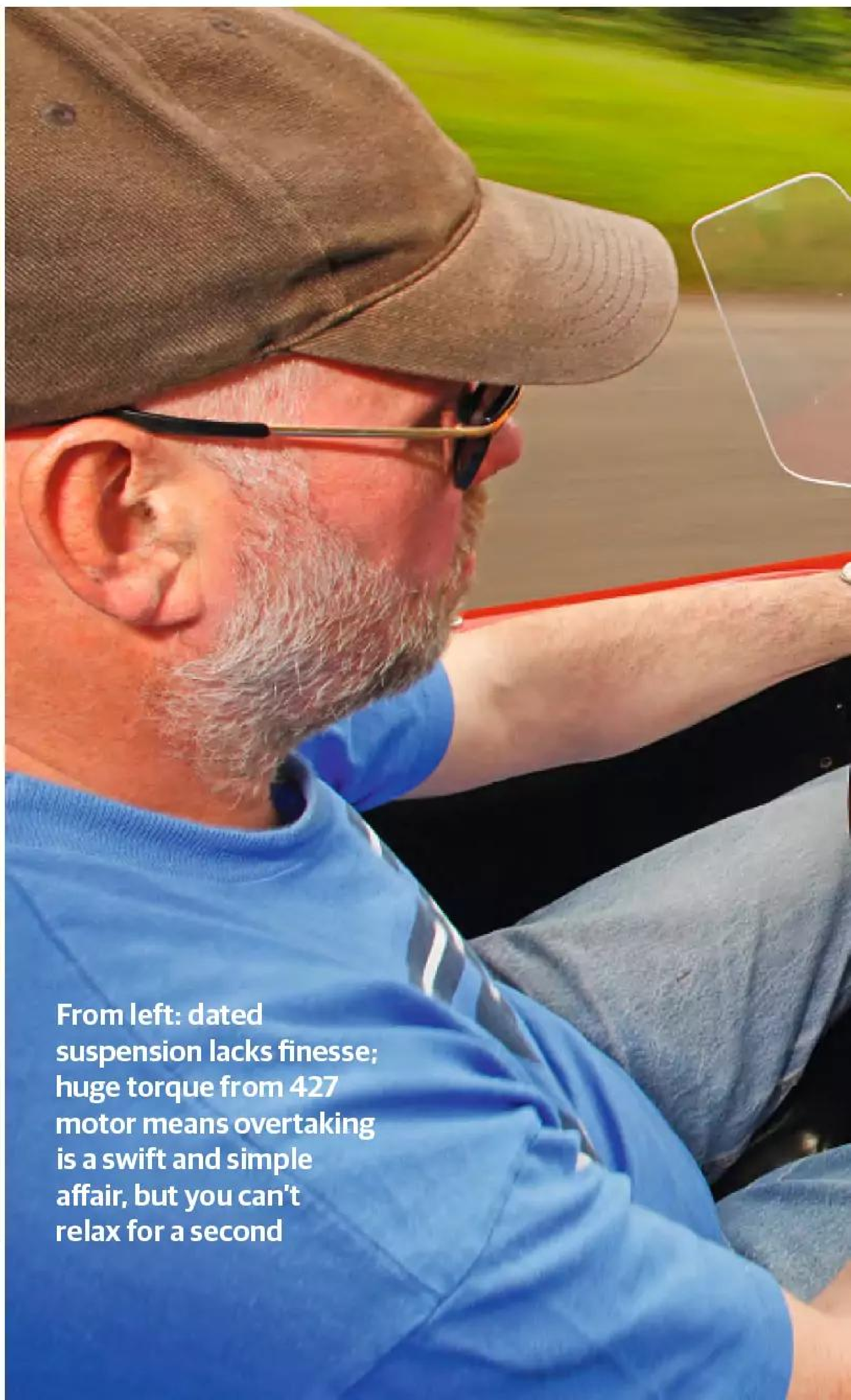
By the early 1980s, and along with the arrival of my driving licence, Cobra infatuation reached fever pitch. Weekends were spent watching the likes of John Atkins and Des Cassidy compete with their ACs in the Historic Sports Car Club's Roadsports championship and, against cars 20 years their junior, the Intermarque series. Rod Leach's infamous twin-turbocharged 'COB 1' was a regular at the major classic shows. Books began to appear, John Christy and Dave Friedman's *Carroll Shelby's Racing Cobra* being a style bible for years to come, followed by Michael Shoen's *The Cobra-Ferrari Wars*, from which I learnt more about the model's competition pedigree, not least how instrumental a fair number of Brits were in its success. Even miniatures were being made, first by St Martins Accessories, swiftly followed by Box. On every level, bar one, my desire was finally being fulfilled.

In the early '80s, a Cobra was advertised in these very pages for £25,000 – a fraction less than the cost of my recently acquired studio flat in Maida Vale. It was a grim realisation: I would never own a real 'snake'. Today the Cobra has taken the lead in that particular race, with early road-car values going stratospheric. In the following decade I enjoyed two brief drives: David Hescroff's beautiful ex-works

AC COBRA 289

Sold/number built 1962-'64/654
Construction steel chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 289cu in (4735cc) V8, Holley four-barrel carburettor
Max power 271bhp @ 5800rpm
Max torque 269lb ft @ 4800rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by wishbones, transverse leaf spring, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion (worm and sector on early cars)
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 12ft 10in (3912mm)
Width 5ft 1in (1549mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1143mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2100lb (953kg)
0-60mph 5.6 secs
Top speed 135mph **Mpg** 15
Price new £2260

Clockwise, from top right: Hi-Po engine; left-hooker features American dials; 15in wire wheels



From left: dated suspension lacks finesse; huge torque from 427 motor means overtaking is a swift and simple affair, but you can't relax for a second

THE STORIES BEHIND 'OUR' CARS

427 COBRA

The true identity of John Stokes' 427 Cobra is a little contentious, in that it has been deprived of a chassis number. The widespread belief among Cobra *cognoscenti*, however, is that it was rebuilt from the remains of a genuine '66 car that was given a new chassis and body after an accident. The original frame and shell were then acquired by a marque expert, who combined these components with a period-correct drivetrain and parts.

289 COBRA

The history of the 289 is much clearer: its trail of several owners has been well documented since it was first sold in Arizona. Originally white with a red interior, it moved around the United States, acquiring a black paint-job along the way. In the late 1980s it was restored for a Japanese collector, who changed the colour to the red it wears today. By 1998 it had returned to Europe and was eventually bought by racer Frank Sytner in 2001.

demonstrator, which, try as I might, simply didn't accommodate my long legs; and the superbly sorted MkIII of Aidan Mills-Thomas.

The reality was that this first automotive love was now well and truly out my league. A brief fling at the inaugural Le Mans Classic behind the wheel of Kevin Kivlochan's Cobra served only to underline that fact. A tsunami of replicas, modelled initially on the big-block cars and latterly the original small-block version, went some way to cooling my ardour. For owners of both genuine and kit cars, the constant mantra of "Is it a real one?" must have become almost as irritating as "What does it do to the gallon?" But what finally broke my heart was the role of the Cobra in contemporary historic motorsport. During the noughties it had been akin to watching that first girlfriend become a top-raking movie star, only to be usurped by a tide of no less pretty but much younger and cheaper Eastern European lookalikes. I was over Cobras.

> *'The Cobra's delicate, pert mouth became a slack-jawed, air-swallowing cavity with rosy cheeks'*

It is said that the divide between love and hate is a pretty thin one, but in recent years I had certainly gravitated towards the latter where the 427 was concerned. As I approach John Stokes' Rangoon Red example, I can only consider just how much the purity of the earlier car's shape was compromised in an attempt to extend the model's lifespan. The delicate, pert mouth became a slack-jawed, air-swallowing cavity with rosy cheeks, and its hips gained an unwieldy amount of weight that was matched only by that of the big-block Ford FE motor crammed under the bonnet. Shod with huge Halibrand alloy wheels – which, in the S/C spec found here, measure 7½x15in up front and 9½x15in at the rear – the car looks every bit the beast of its reputation.

Just 348 of these second-generation cars were built, using an all-new, coil-sprung chassis made from 4in-diameter twin tubes placed 20in apart. That represented an increase in width of 2½in over the original AC Ace Bristol-derived platform of the first Cobras. Covering the revamped running gear, which included new upper wishbones plus revised front and rear locating structures, was a thicker, 0.05in-gauge aluminium skin.

By necessity it ended up 5in wider than its predecessor, but, as I step over the exhausts and slide into the cockpit, it is apparent that there had also been a small gain, front to rear, in the seating area. Fitting in it far more comfortably than I could ever have imagined, I crank the key to the left of the wood-rim steering wheel and wait for the engine to catch. Nothing could have prepared me for what happens next: what sounds like two Harley-Davidson outriders normally employed by Beelzebub explode out of either side of the car. In my head I can hear Bill Cosby's classic skit about his own rather special Cobra: "The car had not moved, I hadn't put my foot on the gas pedal, yet it was killing people."

Pushing the odd-looking, cranked-forward gearlever into first, it is clear that the 'box has its origins in Ford's truck department, and yet, when I let out the clutch, I am amazed by how gentle it is. The throttle pedal, on the other hand, should carry a health warning. Possibly it's the violent noise from the engine, but something tells you to exercise extreme caution with your right foot. In the 10 hours and 260 miles we spent together, not once did I put the pedal all the way to the floor. Instinct? Self preservation? I'm not sure, but anyone who tells you that they drive a 427 is a liar – it drives you. Pick a fight and there will be only one winner. It's like being Peter Sellers in *The Pink Panther*: you're never quite sure when Cato will attack and spit you off the road.

The source of all this potential mayhem is the 7-litre powerplant. A good number of these cars had the 428cu in Le Mans motor, but, apart from the rocker-box covers, John's is actually an earlier 427 'top-oiler', many parts of which are dated 1963. Having been freshened up by Peter Knight, chances are that this car's figures are now way in excess of the regular motor's: 425bhp and 480lb ft in a car weighing just 2529lb. Not surprisingly, I soon learn that overtaking in this left-hooker is not a problem and, like being on the fairground ride that it really is, I actually giggle out loud the first time that I go to pass another car. The acceleration truly warrants that most over-used of American adjectives – awesome.

> *'The clutch is gentle, but the throttle should really carry a health warning'*

On the drive out west along the M4 to a date with one of its smaller-engined ancestors, I can't help thinking that anyone who wanted to race a 427 must have been crazy. As we eat up the miles, however, it does occur to me that it would have been just about perfect as a tool to contest the Cannonball Run. That said, after a while I find the steering at high speed to be lighter than I'd want, the wheel gently vibrating between my fingertips – no doubt a symptom of the car's wide tyres, which, in turn, make changing lanes far more of an adventure.

At slow speeds, however, usually around petrol-station forecourts, the 427 behaves impeccably, the steering being weighty but never a struggle. The real revelation, though, is just how well-mannered this 150mph-plus car is in traffic. Encountering several jams on a rare warm, dry day, the hulking great V8 stays perfectly calm, save the tiniest amount of fuel evaporation, and it happily retains all of its coolant thanks to a Kenlowe fan. I also avoid burning my ankles on the external exhaust pipes – apparently a badge of honour among big-block owners. Off the motorway and along country roads, the Cobra soaks up bumps with ease, and, with the first tank of petrol spent, I am beginning to get worryingly comfortable, particularly when I realise that half an hour has passed without a single gearchange.

It's the huge torque that gives the 7-litre its personality, both good and bad. Accelerate from 80mph and it will take off quicker than most cars from rest, and yet move away from a junction in third gear – something I did more than once – and you would barely notice. It's far from sophisticated: there is no multi-valve chatter or schizophrenic camshafts, just great gobs of tree-pulling grunt.

I am also beginning to think I've been a bit harsh in my opinion of what, for most people, is the ultimate in Cobras – until, that is, we pull into the yard of Neil Dickens at The Hairpin Company. He has two small-block 289s in stock: a right- and a left-hooker. Apart from it being a similar shade of red and lacking a bonnet scoop, the most outstanding feature of the left-hand-drive car is my ability to fit behind the wheel, the result of my right leg only having to operate the throttle pedal from the ankle. All these years and it only required the steering wheel to be on the other side of the car – well, that and a banker's salary. Nevertheless, it is still a snug fit, and I am amazed that a Texan of Carroll Shelby's stature

DRR 855B
222 UBX

The 427 lacks any sort of delicacy next to the 289, a fact that is most strikingly illustrated by the rear view (far right)

Clockwise from top: 427 needs a careful touch in corners; Halibrand alloys; iconic crest; forward-cranked lever; monstrous V8 powerplant

AC COBRA 427

Sold/number built 1965-'66/348
Construction steel chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 427cu in (6997cc) V8, Ford four-barrel carburettor
Max power 390bhp @ 5200rpm
Max torque 475lb ft @ 3700rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft (3962mm)
Width 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1143mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2529lb (1147kg)
0-60mph 4.2 secs
Top speed 165mph **Mpg** 9-12
Price new £3500

should have been happy with the lack of room.

Neil's car wears a CSX chassis number – US cars were prefixed CSX; UK cars COB; and European ones COX – so the gauges are no longer Smiths, as in the 427. Here they are Stewart-Warner, and most of the switchgear is from a Ford Falcon. It's these little touches of Americana that I find so intoxicating. The team Shelby attracted to his operation was among the most talented group of individuals ever assembled in one place. Forgetting the mechanics and drivers for a second, there were the likes of graphic artist and designer Peter Brock, illustrator George Bartel and in-house photographer Dave Friedman. Those back pages stuffed full of all my heroes are encapsulated in this car. I haven't even turned on the ignition and I'm getting pangs.

This example features the 289cu in V8 that, in Hi-Po guise with single four-barrel Holley carb, produced 271bhp – according to the brochures. Once on the move, it's obvious that this AC's Peter Knight motor is putting out way more than that. The clutch is fiercer than in the big-block car, but the noise emanating from the engine isn't so angry. It should be, because the much skinnier car feels almost as fast. Around the Wiltshire lanes its buggy-sprung chassis lets it down slightly, banging and crashing after hitting even the smallest of potholes, but on smoother A- and B-roads it is a sheer delight. As with the larger car, roundabouts are an inconvenience best avoided, but with the 289 you just want to attack everyone that comes along. The driver is in control of the car, not the other way around and, although both Cobras can be fun, you'd only want to marry the smaller of the pair.

Do you, or indeed should you, ever get over your first love? Probably not.

Thanks to *John Stokes; Guy Newton at Coys; Neil Dickens at The Hairpin Company (thehairpincompany.co.uk)*

UNION *of* *the* SNAKE

BLAZE OF HAWAII
29
11 COB
BFL 177B
JA 5

Somerset wakes up to the sound of V8s as Cobras head for the UK's largest gathering. This sensational, 8000bhp party is worth gatecrashing

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Thames Ditton, Silverstone, Oulton Park or Goodwood. All would be highly appropriate venues for Britain's largest gathering of Cobras – but not Sparkford, in the heart of Somerset. Fly posters around the rural town announcing the 'Cobras are coming' warned locals of the V8 invasion, but, other than low-key promotion in the AC Owners' Club magazine, the big day was known only to a select few. Organised by author/historian Rinsey Mills in conjunction with the Haynes family, who have owned their early MkII 289 since the early 1970s, the day marked the arrival of key Shelby team members for the Goodwood Revival. With two Daytonas, the Willment Coupé, an FIA roadster and the Haynes Cobra – COB6029, based at its Motor Museum in Sparkford – the five cars, plus American aces Bob Bondurant and Augie Pabst, provided the perfect excuse for a party.

Rinsey dug out his research notes for his book *Original AC Ace & Cobra* and spent all summer tracking down former Thames Ditton employees who had worked on the legendary shoehorning of Ford Fairlane 260cu in V8 into the pretty AC Ace. From John Tojeiro, the Portuguese-born engineer who started it all with his Cooper-MG special in 1951, to Alan Mann, who managed Shelby's all-conquering 1965 FIA GT challenge, the list of invitees read like a *Who's Who* of Cobra lore. Race mechanics, racers and respected specialists from those golden years soon got word of the gathering, and an informal happening gradually started to build for the big event. With just days to go, there were rumours that a certain tall Texan might even turn up – but no one was promising anything.

Ever the forthright enthusiast, Rinsey has made a firm rule that only Thames Ditton-built Cobras will be allowed into the inner sanctum, but all replicas are welcome to attend. As high noon approaches, the count of 21 just breaks the record set by a previous Cobra gathering at the Silverstone Historic Festival: a hugely impressive result for a mid-week event. Better still, autograph-hunters carrying old photos and Cobra books are happy as word filters through that 'Gentleman' Jack Sears and Sir John Whitmore have turned up to meet their old Shelby team chums.

Luckiest and furthest travelled in a Cobra to the event is Justin Law, who was stunned when dad Don gave him COB009 as a 21st-birthday present. Admittedly, the car was a jigsaw restoration project, but within six months his Cobra was back on the road. In the past six years, Justin – who is only the car's second owner – has covered 30,000 miles, almost always with the top down. He had set off early in the morning from Stoke-on-Trent with girlfriend Hanna, roared down to Sparkford and later blasted on to Goodwood.

Cobras have a macho reputation as raw brutes, but that's never deterred Maggie Green who used to commute 20 miles every day in her mint, Vineyard Green MkII COB6020, owned since 1974. "I used to cause traffic jams because of the interest from other drivers," Maggie says, "so in the end I left early in the morning. I love the acceleration, but I'm not too partial to the brakes. I took a friend out once who remarked that it felt a lot faster than 60mph before I pointed out she was looking at the rev counter. The biggest problem is my daughter's boyfriends who, as soon as they learn that I own a Cobra, want to go for a ride. Now we have a rule: she doesn't tell them about it."

With the arrival of Sears, Whitmore and Bondurant (straight off a flight from Arizona), the Daytona and Willment coupés are wheeled out of the Haynes museum workshops for demonstration runs. The sight of the brutish, devil-red racer brings a big smile to the face of the long-legged Norfolk farmer Sears, and it

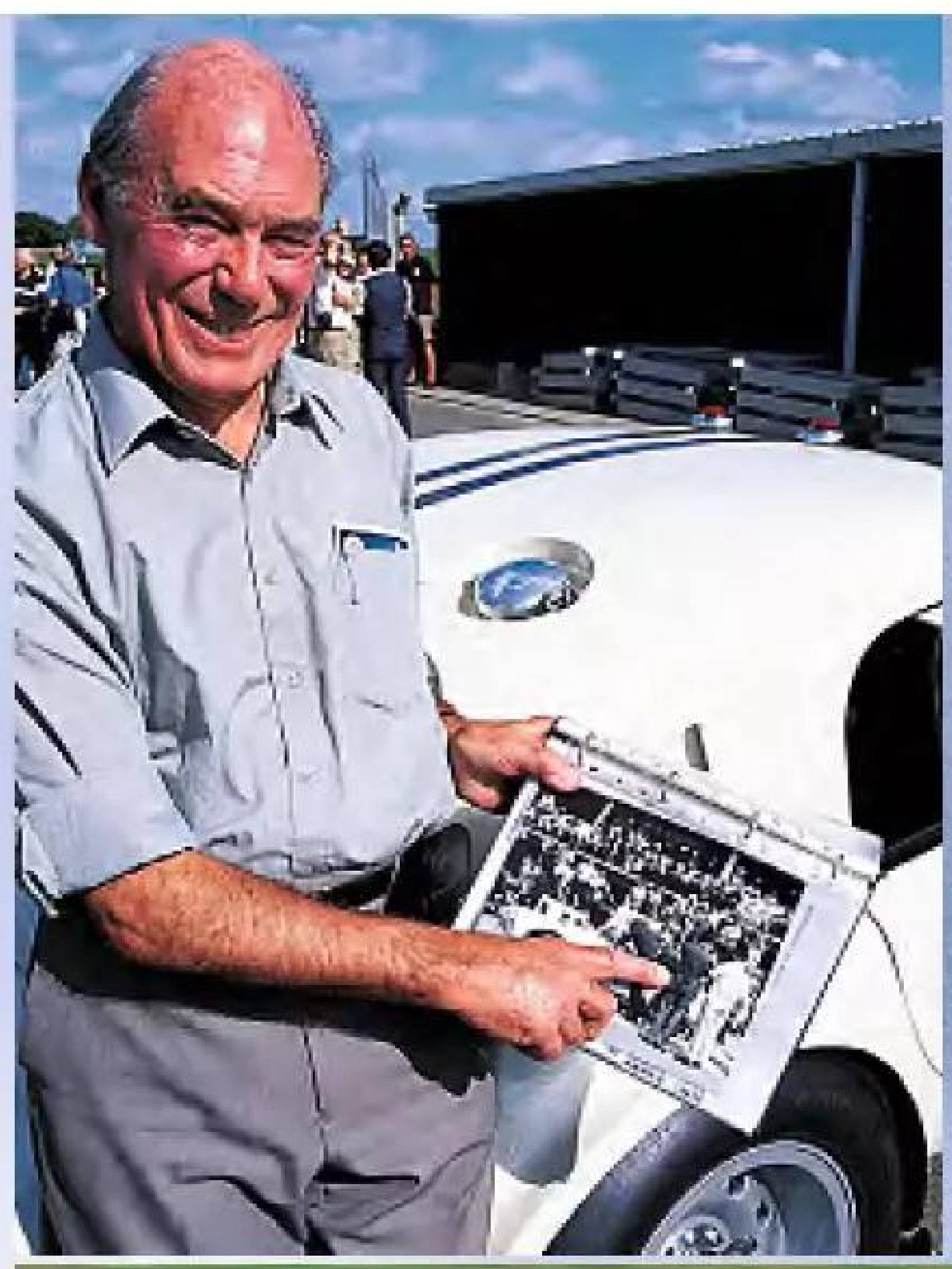
"When we put that Ford V8 in the Ace chassis," admits Carroll Shelby in a moving tribute, "everybody thought the thing would break in two, but I had a wonderful relationship with AC Cars"

doesn't take much to persuade him to take another drive. Jack happily contorts into the Twickenham-built Willment team car and guns it around the test track with his old gusto, saying: "There's little to choose between this and a Daytona, but this car is special as I drove it in one of my best races. It was late October in 1964, and I drove it for the first time during qualifying for the Snetterton 3 Hours. We were up against a group of sports-racers, with Hill and Salvadori, but it was my local track. The start was wet, but we progressed well, leading the GTs. The race was run into the evening, and I carried sunglasses for the late sun, but with darkness came this thick fog. I'd done several 24-hour reliability runs at Snetterton so was used to driving it in the dark. At around two hours, I became aware of this group following, and every time I passed a car it just joined the crocodile. With 10 minutes to go I saw a pit sign P1 PLUS 1 lap. Only then did I realise I was leading the whole field by a lap."

As we eye up the Daytonas, the Willment Coupé and six competition roadsters, Jack says it was impossible to compare them: "They were all enormous fun to drive, but the roadster was more difficult because everything used to flex and twist under the torque of the engine. It took a certain amount of skill and courage to get the most out of it. The Daytona Coupe was totally different – much stiffer, and it handled better thanks to Shelby American. It was actually very easy to drive."

Another surprise visitor with vivid memories of the Willment Coupé is George Pitt, who used it as a road car from 1968-'76. "I part-exchanged it for a secondhand E-type when I was 21 and drove it with a race engine on the road," he recalls. "It still had the flashing roof lights, which were always a party piece when arriving at the pub. Later my insurance company insisted I detune it, so we took the Webers off and fitted a Holley. It was a great road car and the air scoops really worked so you didn't get hot inside. I remember convoying to Le Mans with a group of Ford GT40s, and they had to keep stopping because of cockpit heat. It was really quick, as proven in the Pomeroy Trophy when I recorded 0-143mph in 19 secs. The only problem was that the doors kept coming open on fast corners."

All day there are wonderful moments, reunions and presentations. George had dug out the original Willment fuel filler from the loft for Bill Murray, a curator at the Shelby American Collection in Colorado. "You search for years for Cobra artefacts, but the best things like this come out of nowhere," he says.

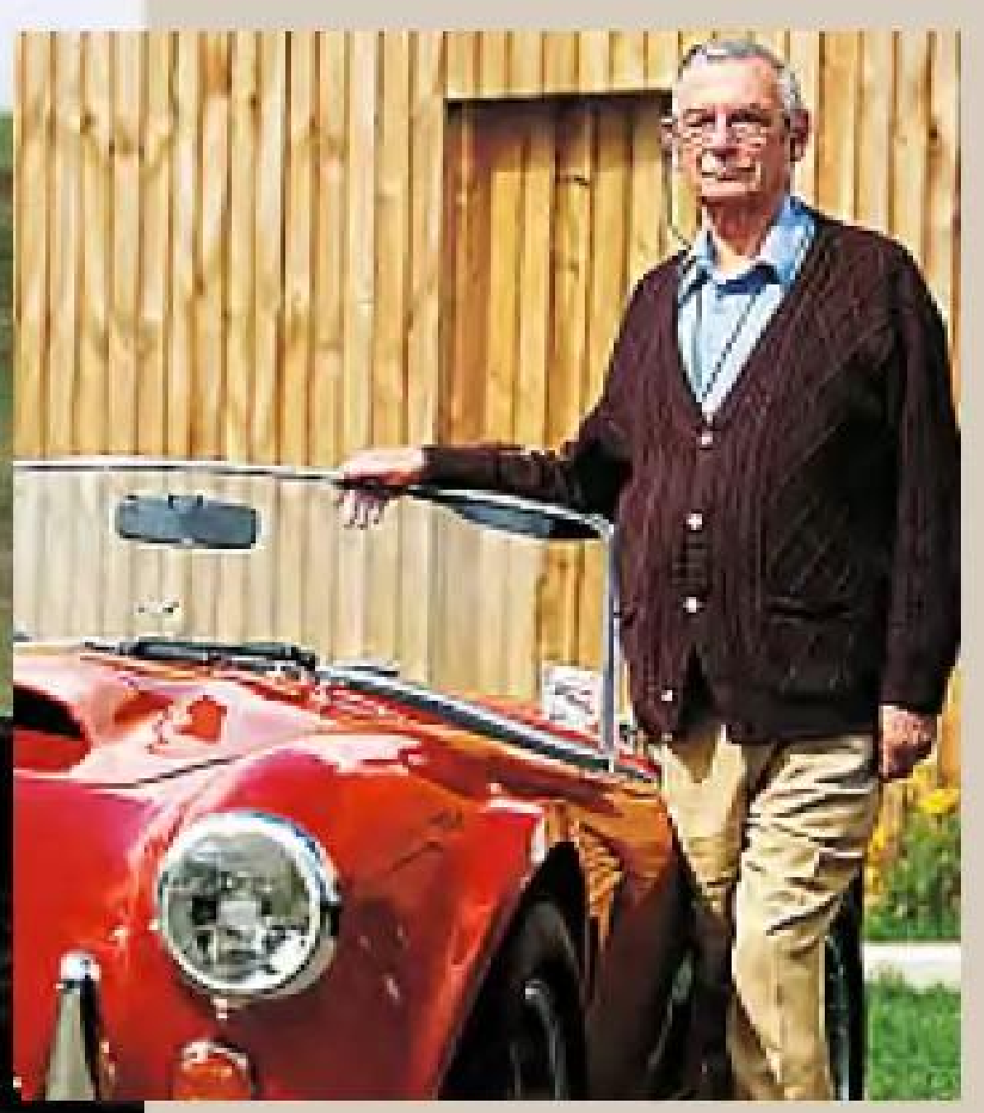


Fred Aylett, one of AC's longest-serving staff, and the '63 Le Mans Cobra

RALLY MAN CHARMS WISCOMBE
PAUL CHANNON

After rallying a Mini Cooper 'S', Dorchester garage owner Paul Channon began to look around for a suitable sports car in which to do some sprinting. He says: "First I bought a Healey Silverstone, but after 12 months I wanted something with a bit more poke. I remember eyeing up the new Cobra on the AC stand at the Motor Show in 1965, but its £2600 price was a dream. In 1969 I spotted a low-mileage Cobra for sale in Wolverhampton, and although £1220 was still a big stretch, I did a deal and met him on the Ross spur road with the cash."

Bought with 18,000 miles, COB6039 has now covered 87,000. "I've done more than 300 speed events and always drive to competitions," Paul says. "With two exceptions I've also driven home. Both incidents were during the Pomeroy Trophy, when I spun in the wet.

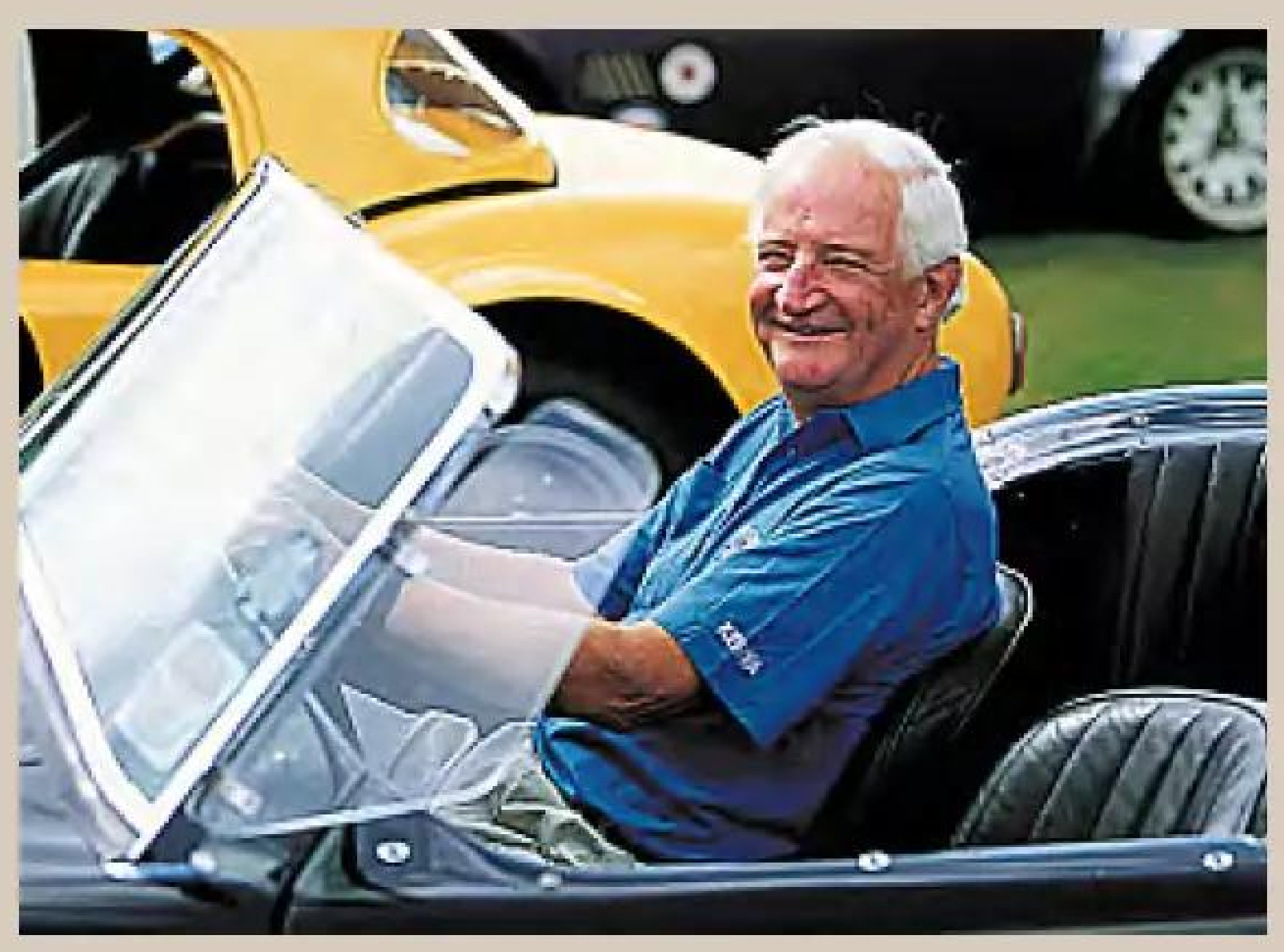


"My favourite venue is Wiscombe, where I've slowly lowered the sports car record time over the years. Two-up at Colerne I once saw 170mph on the clock; it felt really secure. Anything over 120mph and you really don't notice the difference. At Weston-super-Mare I did 0-100mph in less than 10 secs. Its acceleration and tractability always impress, but on B-roads it rattles and jiggles around. I also hate the fuel consumption, which, on Webers, is about 13mpg no matter how you drive.

"Over the years I've tuned the engine, trying several cam options, and the best by far is Mathwall's road/race version. The last time we had it on a rolling road it was giving 350bhp at the rear wheels, but the tester didn't want to take it over 6000rpm because it was getting a bit lively."

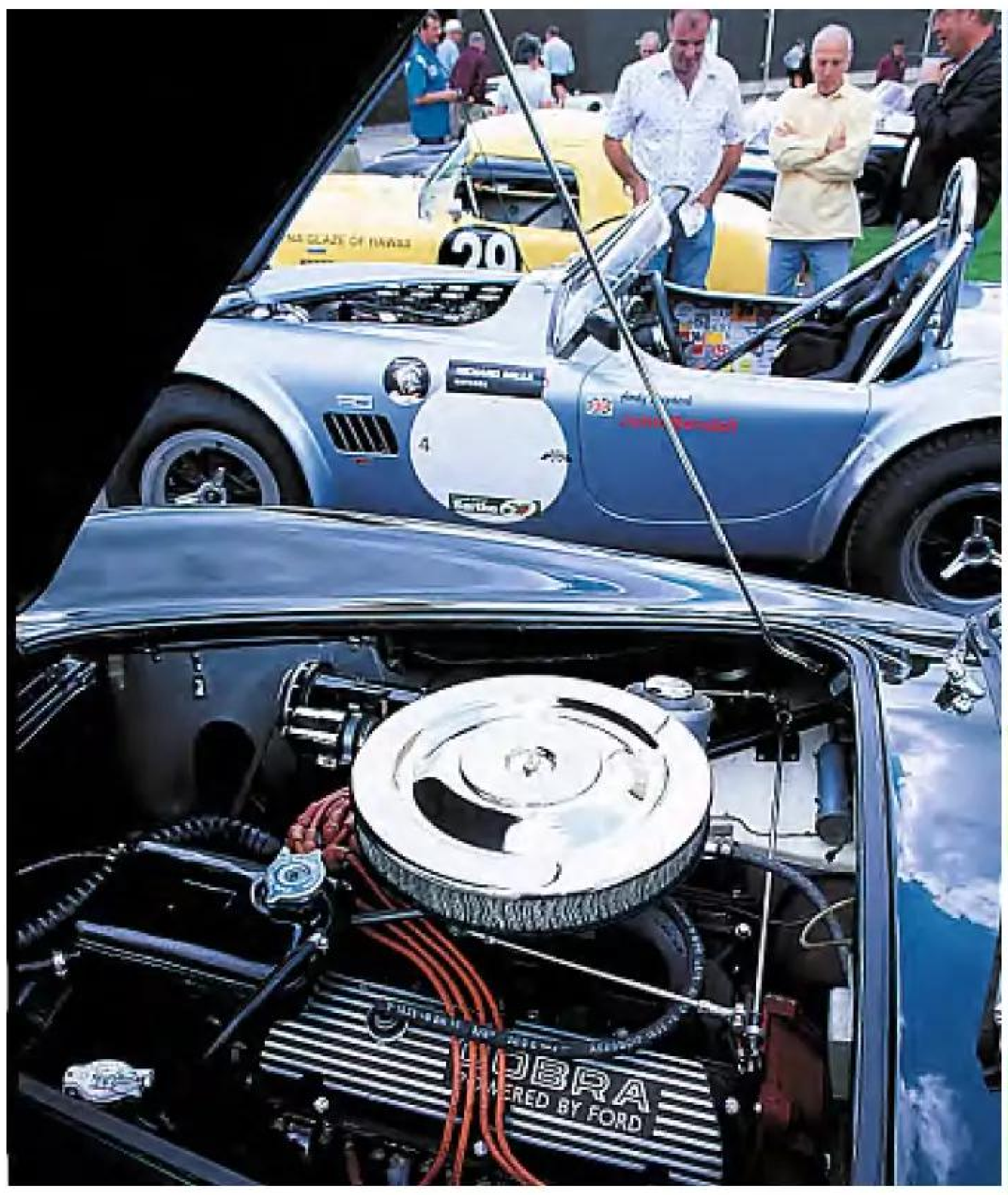
AC
APA 6B
COB 2

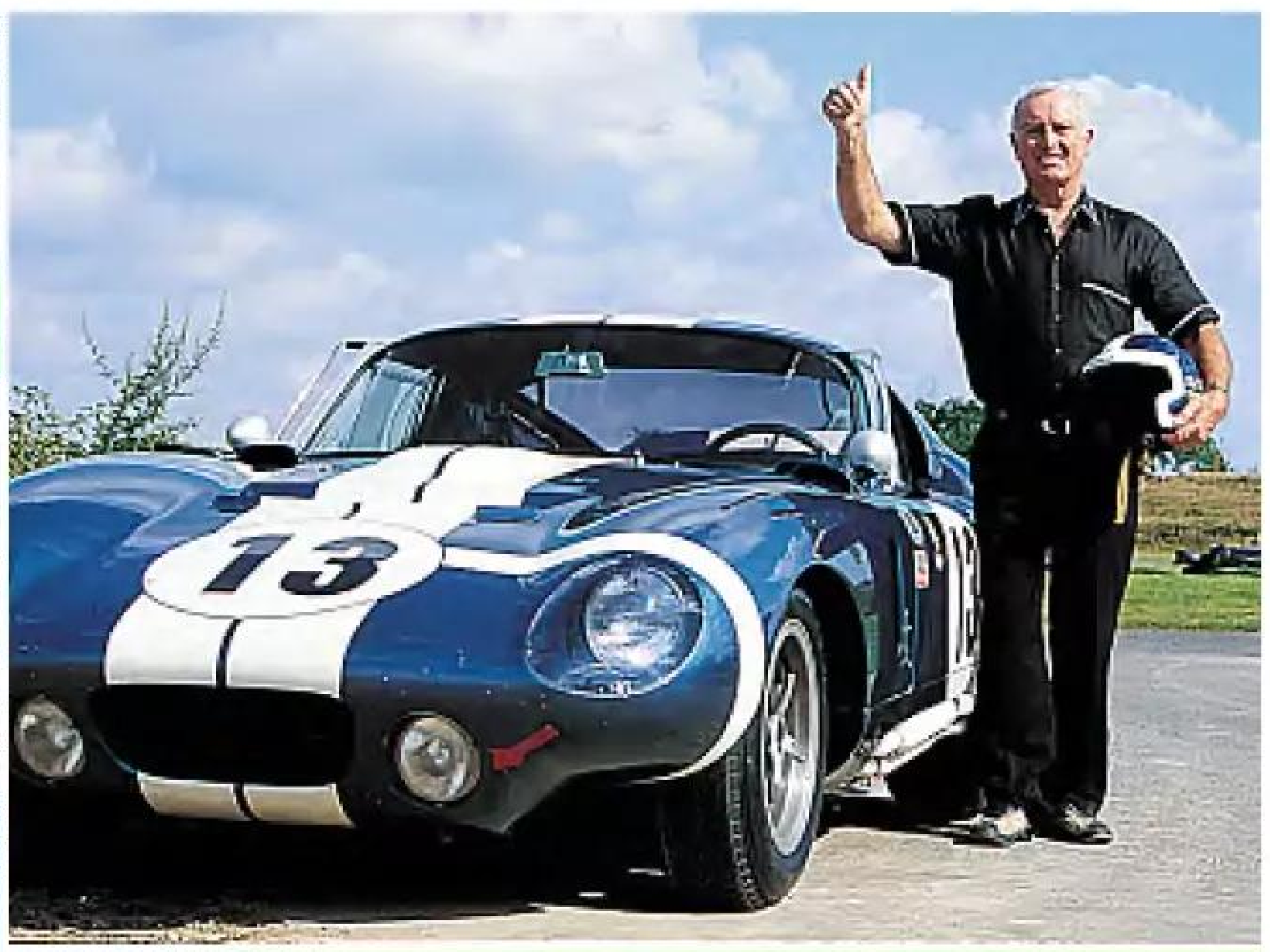
Mick Walsh in MkII sandwiched by the 'Hairy Canary' racer and Richard Dangerfield's fearsome 7-litre



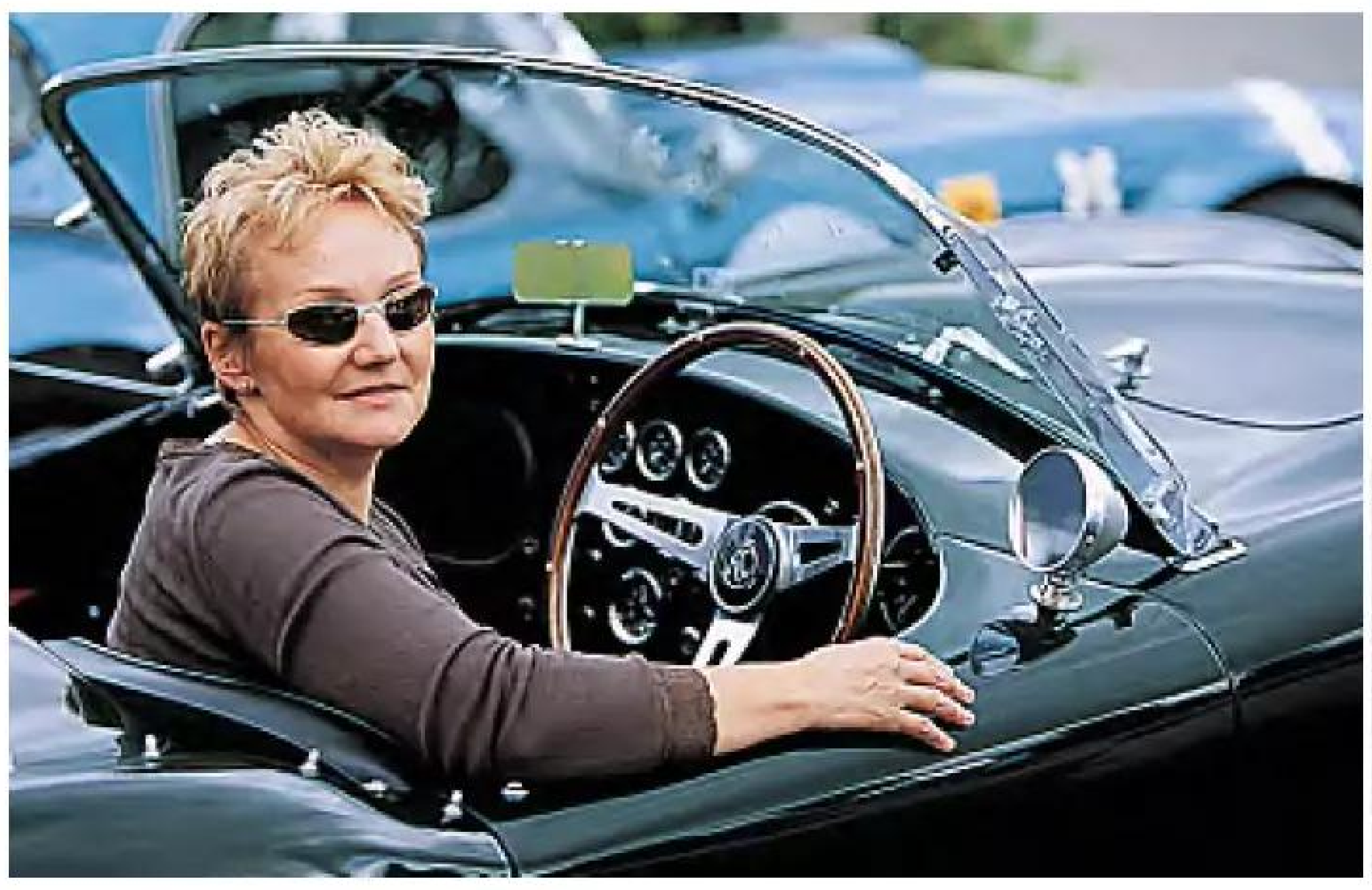
MOTOR MAN'S 7-LITRE EXCLUSIVE
RICHARD DANGERFIELD

Working on *Motor* in the late 1960s, one car left an indelible impression on Richard Dangerfield. "AC loaned the magazine a 7-litre Cobra and I took it down the old A3 to Guildford," he says. "I'll never forget the 50 yards of black lines it left in second. AC was struggling to sell Cobras and offered it to us for £6000. It was a huge sum, but I vowed to buy one." After his children had left school, his wish finally came true in '93 when he acquired the fearsome black, big-block COX6112. It started life as a MkII 289, but was crashed in the Mont Blanc tunnel and rebuilt by AC as a 7-litre. "The performance is out of this world," Richard says, "but you have to respect it on wet roads. I've done two 360° spins, but luckily didn't hit anything. My wife is insured to drive but doesn't want the responsibility. Best of all is the torque. You can drop to 20mph in top then accelerate to 140."





Clockwise from above: Hi-Po Ford V8s cool off; Shelby team ace Bob Bondurant gives his old Daytona Coupe the thumbs-up; 81-year-old John Tojeiro enjoys a ride in Tim Pearce's highly original 289; mean line-up; Maggie Green with mint 289



After all the excitement of the demonstration runs, a chauffeur-driven Jaguar arrives, delivering the great-grandaddy of the Cobra, John Tojeiro. "I remember Charles Hurlock looking at my prototype and thinking it would require a big machine shop to build it," recalls the now-frail 81-year-old, who was very happy to see an honorary Ace present in the Cobra line-up. "At the time, the AC works was a simple affair. My friend Ernie Bailey [who built the Buckland bodies for AC] told them that my Special had been built in a garage smaller than AC's toilets. The deal of £5 per car, limited to 100 cars, summed up my attitude to life at the time. Money was secondary; the main thing was to enjoy myself."

Another unsung hero, spotted admiring Simon Hadfield's masterful recent restoration of the original, factory-prepared prototype 1963 Le Mans entry, CS2130, is Freddie Aylett, one of AC's longest-serving employees. Having joined the firm in 1950 from the services, he stayed for the following 36 years. "I remember the day Shelby arrived at the workshops," he explains. "We were all agog that this famous American racing driver, who'd won Le Mans for Aston Martin, was visiting us. Later there was a real buzz as the new car was being developed in the experimental department in the Woodmill Shop. I was busy running the service area, but I remember going up to see how Jim [Bennett] and John [Peck] were getting along. Later, when they started building the Le Mans cars for 1963 (645 CGT and 39 PH), I would join them after hours to help. I went with the team to Le Mans as a mechanic and remember being very nervous, hoping I'd do the right thing at the right time during the pitstops. Stirling Moss was our team manager, and he soon put us all at ease. When this car [645 CGT] threw a rod in the 10th hour, we all worked in shifts on 39 PH. It was the first British car to finish, and I think everyone was amazed that it was still running at the end."

Owner Frank Sytner later produces an album of photos of 645 CGT in the pits at Le Mans, and Freddie points out himself in the packed pitlane, watched by eagle-eyed *plombiers*. He says: "Soon after the cars were back in Thames Ditton, Jim and I loaded up 39 PH and took it to MIRA. They belted the car around all day and all the mechanics got a ride. The performance was just fantastic, but charging around the handling course felt like being at sea."

Despite only landing that morning from a transatlantic flight, Bob Bondurant is as enthusiastic as ever about meeting his old team pals and the prospect of racing the Daytona in the Royal Automobile Club TT Celebration at Goodwood. "Being involved with Shelby American and winning at Le Mans with Dan Gurney in 1964 and the World Championship in 1965 were the biggest thrills of my life," says Bob. "Those were great times and we had a ball. No one believed that Carroll could take on the might of GM and Ferrari with a dream and a bunch of kids, then beat them. But he did."

Bob was driving the Shelly Washburn Corvette at Riverside when the Cobra appeared with Billy Krause. He continues: "I must confess that I wasn't a believer in the beginning. I should have been. It didn't take long to see the writing was on the wall. That Cobra was much quicker than the Corvette, even with a 260 engine. I could out-corner the Cobra, but couldn't out-accelerate or out-brake it. If Krause hadn't broken the hub-carrier on the Cobra, he would have walked away with that race. Later, I had fun driving the roadsters because you could really throw them around, but if you wanted to win in Europe you had to drive the Coupe."

Bob's first race in Europe with the Cobra was the 1964 Targa Florio. He recalls: "Racing over 1000-year-old roads loaded with huge potholes, in a car with an antiquated suspension, was a bone-jarring experience, but I loved the challenge of learning that historic road course."

Another with vivid Targa memories is Bruce Bell, who, on a gap year, had hitched across Europe to Sicily. Any English voice in the Targa pits was welcome to the Americans, and Bruce was soon unofficially part of the team, doing the sandwich runs. Such are Cobra reunions that you never know who might turn up.

There had been rumours all week that 'King Cobra', as Jack affectionately calls Carroll Shelby, might turn up, and when a helicopter finally lands in the back field in the early evening, the party is complete. Carroll, now walking with a stick, has lost none of his blunt Texas charm despite his new heart. When he sees the Daytonas, he immediately enquires about the results at the recent Oldtimer-Grand Prix at the Nürburgring. Crew chief Bill Murray reports that they'd been chasing a hot Corvette for fourth. "He was all over the track throwing stones up at us," says Bill. "One cut the fanbelt and we had to park." "What the hell were you doing behind a Corvette, anyway?" exclaims Shelby, before moving on to admire the rebuild of his first Le Mans Cobra, 645CGT. "We knew, after that race in '63, we had to build something dramatically different to beat Ferrari," Carroll recalls. "Even with the hardtop, it wasn't much quicker than a roadster. John Wyer's Project Astons impressed me, so we had to come up with a completely new aerodynamic body."

At dinner, Jack takes the opportunity to clear his name as the party responsible for the introduction of the national speed limit when, 40 years ago, he tested the ill-fated A98 Le Mans Coupé at 185mph on the M1.

"A police car did turn up, but they weren't a bit worried," Jack insists. "Derek Hurlock's nephew, Tony Martin, was present and later that day, at lunch in a Fleet Street wine bar, he was relating the story of the high-speed run and word got around. Barbara Castle, an outspoken Labour politician, was Minister of Transport and years later I asked her about the speed limit. She said the AC saga had nothing to do with it, so that's my defence."

The dinner is low-key, but the memories flow as the night draws in. Among the famous stars are lesser-known Cobra characters such as Peter Jopp, whose rally success with Falcons and an impressive Tour de France challenge with a Galaxie earned him an AC drive at Sebring in March '63. Little known is that Peter made the Cobra's European debut at Silverstone in May as a test run for Le Mans in June. He says: "Graham Hill and all the rest were in GTOs and I drove the first Cobra. My wife told me everyone in the grandstand was on their feet. It was the old long circuit and we'd come under the bridge into the fast Woodcote right-hander. The car was a real handful and was all over the place. We'd only just finished it the night before, and I remember the scrutineers insisting we put a piece of hardboard down between the back seats and the petrol tank."

Carroll has to leave early, but not before making a moving tribute. "When we first put that Ford V8 in the Ace chassis," he admits, "everybody thought the thing would break in two, but I had a wonderful relationship with AC Cars. Forty years on, I never dreamed of an evening like this. I have mixed emotions about the replicas, as you know, but they've helped to keep the Cobra legend alive." Later he signs a gift picture for John Tojeiro and for the first time concedes that "without you it would never have happened". It's confirmation that the failed chicken farmer and '59 Le Mans winner is getting soft in his old age.

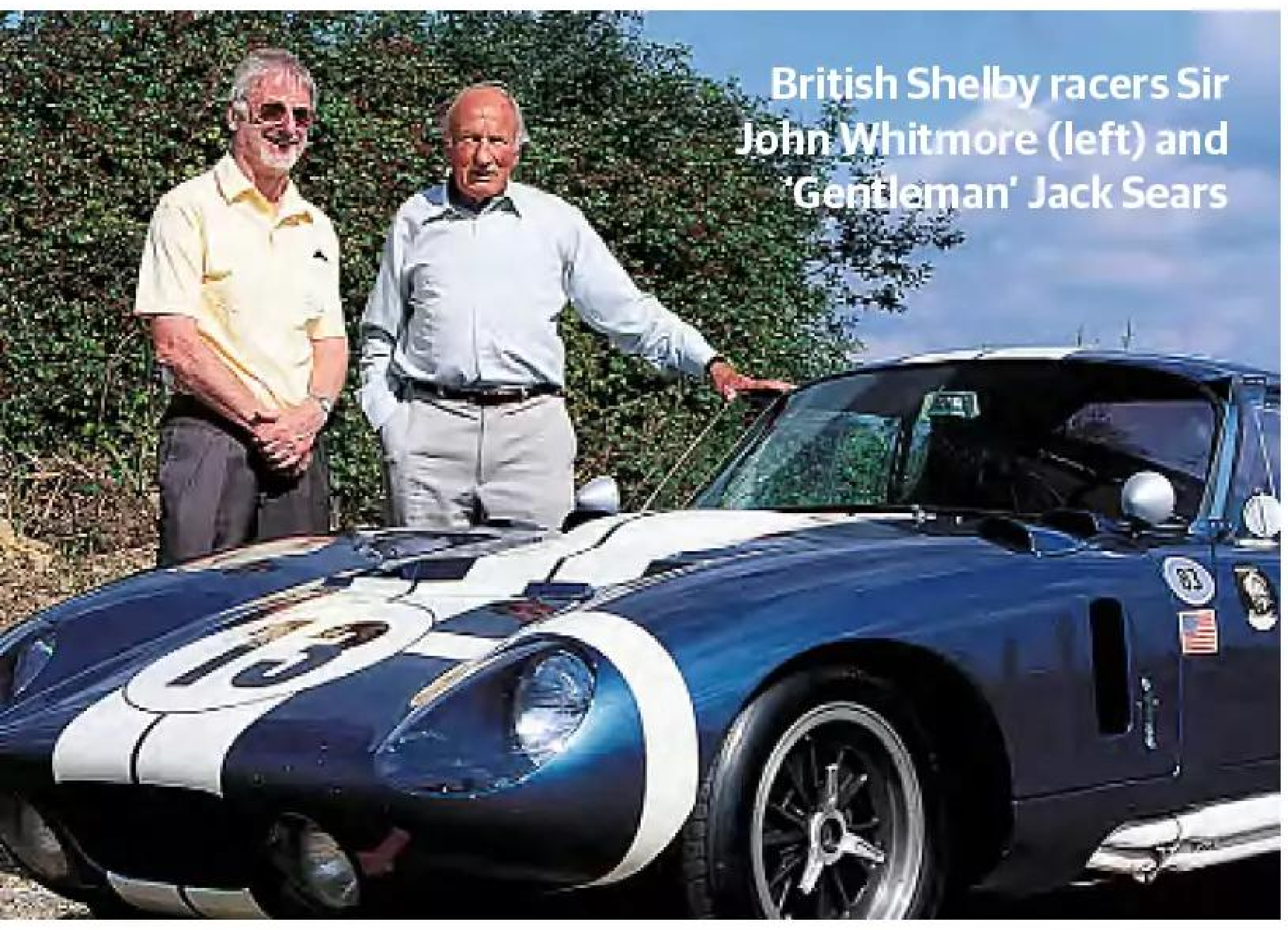
Reluctant to leave such a historic gathering, I at least have the perfect incentive because long-time friend David Hescroff offers me the keys to his treasured MkII, COB6005, for the run back to his Dorset home. There's nothing like a night drive on clear roads, under a full moon, to revive enthusiasm for a favourite car. This was the first Cobra I drove, and it's still

Haynes family's 289, owned since the '70s high on my dream list. The roads are dry, but sidescreens are slotted into for the chilly blast down the A37 to Dorchester and into the heart of Hardy country. The biggest challenge is reining in the Cobra's pace, because speed cameras now sprout all along this fast route.

From the moment that muscular 289 erupts down the stainless exhaust pipes and its raucous burble reverberates around the walls, I know why this car is so special. Marc Haynes, son of founder John and now the museum's manager, has similarly fond memories of the family Cobra. "When I was five, playing in the garden at home," he says, "I remember the sound of dad starting up the Cobra to go to work. We could hear him for all of the two miles until he arrived at the office and switched off."

With one drainpipe for each of your ears, this mildly tuned hunk of Motown iron sounds great, from lazy rumba idle beat to raw-edged bellow under hard acceleration. In the dark it's even more aggressive, feeding fantasies of Le Mans and Sebring, particularly when scything through drifting mists up Break Heart Hill.

The Cobra is in its element on smooth roads and through fast sweepers: with power on, the chassis is sharp and resolute – the greater the torque to the rear, the more edgily responsive it feels at the wheel. Respect its power with precise technique and it always feels on your side. A colleague always vouched for how the AC will look after you, after a near big moment he had driving back from Wales, and I concur with him. 'Faithful' is not a word you associate with a Cobra, but it's nonetheless valid.


British Shelby racers Sir John Whitmore (left) and 'Gentleman' Jack Sears

Only on rough, rural back-roads does the chassis show its age as it bucks and jiggles. Every bump is telegraphed to the broad, wood-rimmed wheel, but that's the price you pay for sharp steering. Travelling quickly on a bumpy road is not a Cobra *forté*. The agitated, jolty ride has a vintage character and makes it easy to appreciate the daunting challenge of Sicilian mountain roads for the likes of Bondurant and Hill on the Targa Florio. At race speeds it must have felt more like taming a bucking bronco.

The brakes don't really inspire, either. The unassisted pedal needs a hefty shove to stop quickly from speed. Although progressive, the action lacks reassuring feel and bite for such a potent machine. But these are minor quibbles on such a memorable run. Tipping the scales at 2000lb, the road-test figures and its power-to-weight ratio of just over 300bhp per ton say it all: the 289 will power dramatically to 60mph in 5 secs and on to 100mph in 13.4 secs, and it storms the quarter mile in 12.4 secs. Better still, the slick action of the Borg-Warner T10 'box's stubby lever makes that dynamic delivery all the more enjoyable as it snakes away. But it's torque rather than horsepower that makes the Cobra so easy to drive. Its flexible delivery could have hauled us all the way home in top with no trouble, but that would miss the point of its shattering performance.

Crude, unsophisticated and riotously macho, the beautifully understated Cobra 289 is still a fantastically rewarding driver's car – which is why owners keep them for so long.

This story was first published in C&SC in November 2004. Since then, Marc Haynes, Jack Sears, Sir John Whitmore, Bob Bondurant, John Tojeiro and Carroll Shelby have all sadly passed away

DEMONSTRATOR STILL COMMUTES

DAVID HESCROFF

David Hescroff will never forget the visit to a Richmond lock-up to collect COB6005, which he bought from James Bond movie stuntman Colin Skeaping in 1981: "He had a pet tarantula, which I spotted on top of the cage. Thankfully, it turned out to be only its old skin. Skeaping hadn't used the car much, but that soon changed." David often takes his Cobra abroad, including memorable trips to Angoulême and the Coppa Dolomiti, as well as AC Owners' Club internationals. He's also driven both ways across America in a friend's 289.

When his Brooklands Ace is proving troublesome, the Cobra has been David's daily driver: "It was the second works demonstrator and was kept at Thames Ditton until the end of '65. It appeared in the brochures and Derek Hurlock drove it to Le Mans in 1964. Keith Judd drove it on Southport Sands at 140mph. With a high axle, it's a bit low-geared for motorways, and above 90mph you get a blasting. The only mod is a 7-litre radiator for traffic."

Jack Sears takes the fabulous, Twickenham-built Willment Coupé for another blast

JOHN WILLMENT RACING TEAM
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DYNA GLAZE OF HAWAII
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NOT SO MELLOW YELLOW

The long and colourful journey from Honolulu to Goodwood for the 'Hairy Canary' Cobra

WORDS **JULIAN BALME** PHOTOGRAPHY **OLGUN KORDAL**

DYNA GLAZE OF HAWAII
AP
36

'All of the modern tweaks, so common when prepping a Cobra for historic racing, were ignored; every detail was fastidiously researched'

The 2018 Goodwood Revival marked something of a watershed moment not only for the meeting turning 20, but also for long-time Cobra enthusiast Bill Bridges: it would be the last time he and his faithful, bright-yellow British/American roadster contested the Royal Automobile Club TT Celebration race.

Fittingly, Bill and co-driver Ludovic Lindsay lapped quicker than in any of the car's 11 previous outings, and at a pace that would have seen the car garner a win when it was first entered in the prestigious event in 2004. On the surface, their finishing position within the top half of the field appeared respectable, but it disguised the fact that numerous entrants had taken each other out or pushed the development envelope one step too far. So, having restored and maintained the 'Hairy Canary' primarily by himself during the past 15 years, aided by a small group of experts and chums, Bill felt that he had probably gone as far as he could with the Cobra. He had also found himself in a very different, less comfortable environment from that when he had first started out in historic racing.

Like all of the Canary's previous owners, Bill had started his racing career with a Cobra – in his case a bright-yellow AC MkIV that he campaigned in the Intermarque series. It was replaced by the blue AC 289 formerly owned by Aidan Mills-Thomas, but really he longed for a competition, leaf-sprung, pre-'65 Cobra. A right-hooker MkII (COB6044) was acquired and subsequently built into a racer, but Bill hankered after an all-out period racing car. An opportunity finally arose via AC fancier Kevin Kivlochan, who had bought an unrestored race car from Bill Connell in Knoxville, Tennessee. Funds had barely landed in the American's account before Kevin's head was turned by another project, and as a result Bill was able to strike a deal, sight unseen, while the Hairy Canary (CSX2151) was still on the water.

By the time it arrived on UK shores it was tired and bore the scars of a competitive life that lasted to its retirement from West Coast club racing in 1983. But in the 20 years that followed the car had remained unused, complete and largely original – bar an enlarged later small-block Ford engine courtesy of second owner Gary Hauser. It was under the stewardship of the original keeper, Richard 'Dick' J Neil Jnr, that the yellow Cobra's Hairy Canary nickname began to gain some traction – although this snake hadn't always been seen wearing such a brightly coloured skin.

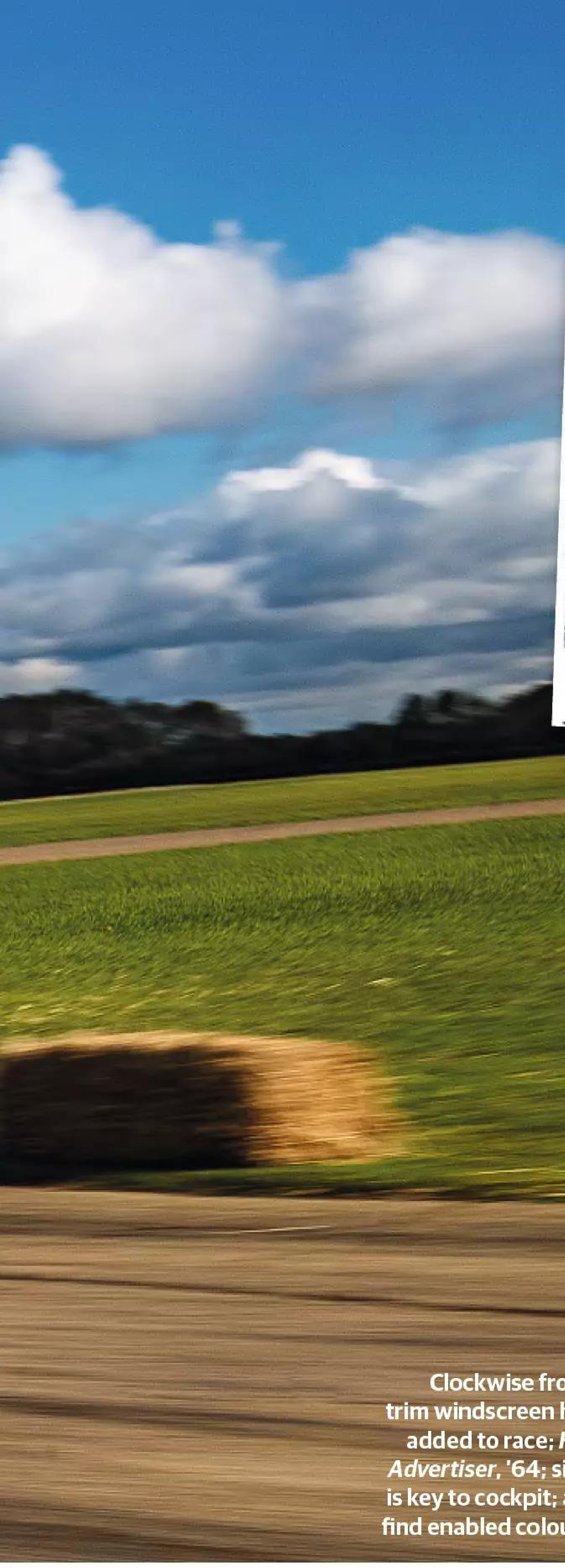
In 1963, Massachusetts-based Neil Jnr was in his 20s and itching to go racing. Alumnus of the Sports Car Club of America's Connecticut wing race school, he was relocated to Hawaii and had intended to drive his early 260cu in (4.2-litre) Cobra road car – with worm-and-sector steering – to Los Angeles before shipping it to the island state. He got only as far as Syracuse in the next state before it broke down. Frustrated, he shipped the car to Shelby's complex in Venice, California, arriving at the end of August later that year.

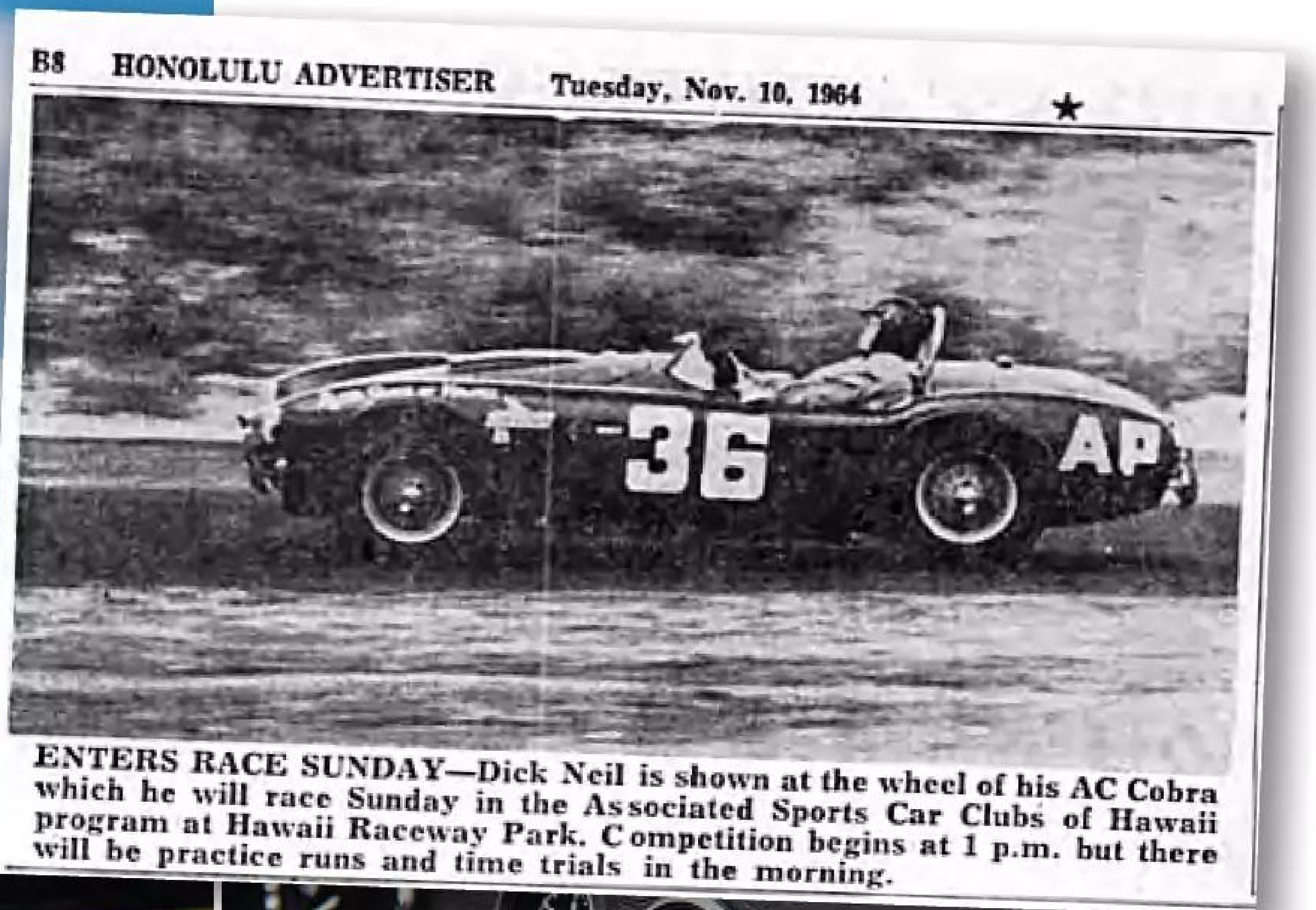
Carroll Shelby, looking to avoid a potentially damaging situation, managed to turn things around in his inimitable style by taking Neil Jnr's Cobra (CSX2005), plus cash, in exchange for a "brand-new '64 model, boy!". But the car was no such thing. The Cobra had always been conceived as a competition car, and production modifications were made after nearly every race. So its larger 289cu in (4.7-litre) engine was already being used, and the cars had gone to rack-and-pinion steering and 3.77 rear-end ratios. They had also gained side vents to help rid the engine bay of excess heat, but the chances are that Neil Jnr's new ride was the first example to get them as standard.

Finished in Vineyard Green with beige interior, the Cobra was treated to American Racing five-spoke wheels, Weber carburettors, competition scattershield (bellhousing) and a roll bar, according to the Shelby American Automobile Club (SAAC), before being freighted to Honolulu. With the imminent arrival on the island of Shelby heroes Dave McDonald and Ken Miles for the Hawaiian Grand Prix in the October of '63, Neil Jnr took the plunge and entered his first race: a novice-only contest on the main event's support bill. He won the preliminary qualifier but failed to start the main. Nevertheless he was hooked, and for two further years he would enter all manner of local SCCA competition, including scratch races, hillclimbs and gymkhanas. He competed in them all with distinction, finishing third in the 1964 Hawaiian GP and winning the same race a year later.

Neil Jnr maintained sponsorship from Hawaiian car-polish company Dyna Glaze and at the end of the '64 season, prompted by an off-course excursion, had the car repainted an eye-catching yellow – possibly inspired by the Coventry Motors-entered Cobra of Allen Grant, one of the few privateers to get close to the works cars. It soon gained the affectionate and famous moniker of the Hairy Canary.

Neil Jnr moved back to the mainland and continued to race CSX2151 in SCCA events throughout the Pacific Northwest, eventually selling the car to Hauser in 1972. Two years later the Canary found a new custodian, Canadian Ray Cooke, who ditched the yellow in favour of white while massaging the car's wheelarches and adding a full-width roll hoop. He developed and raced the car in historic events for a decade before it eventually found its way to the sympathetic ownership of Bill Bridges, via its tenure in Knoxville.





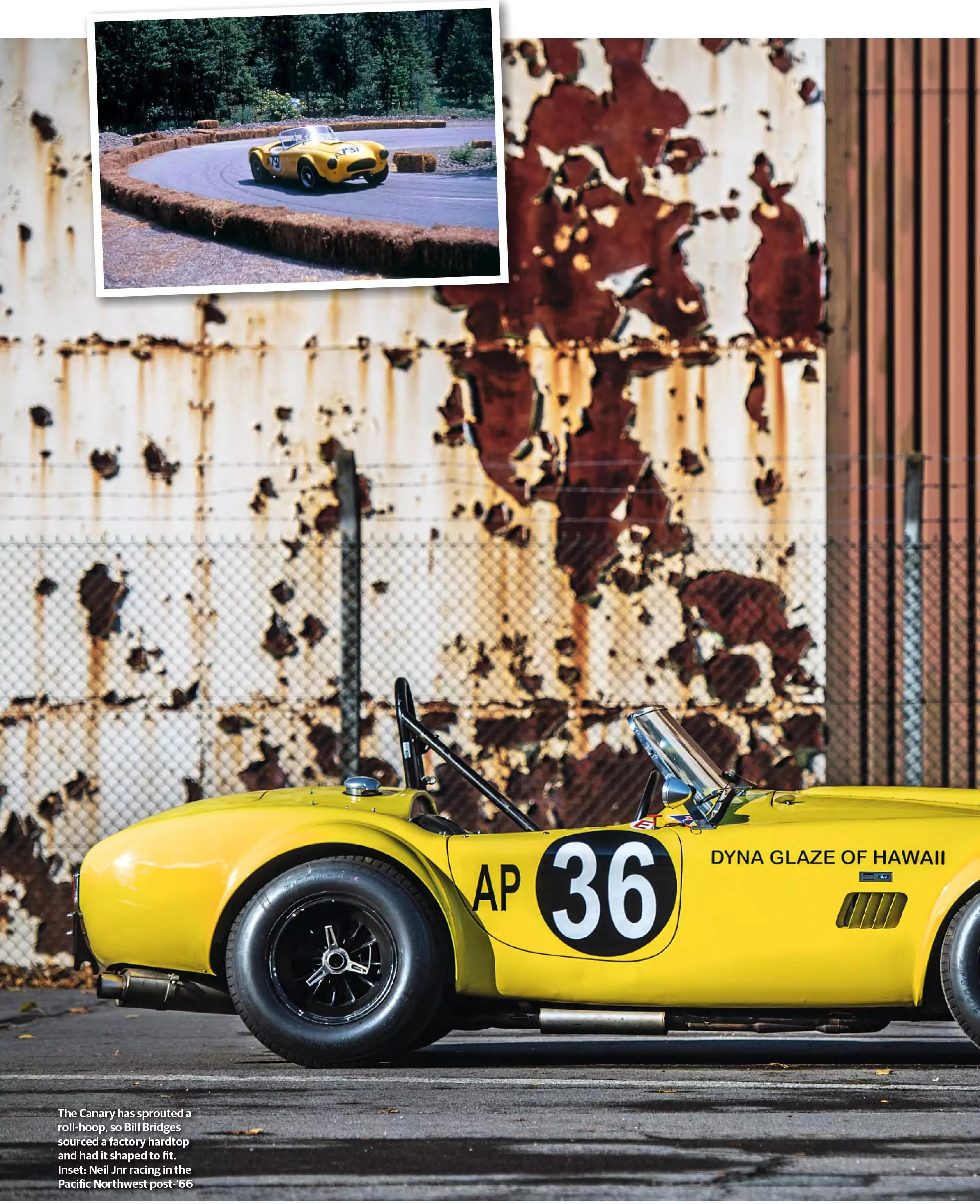
B8 HONOLULU ADVERTISER Tuesday, Nov. 10, 1964 ★

ENTERS RACE SUNDAY—Dick Neil is shown at the wheel of his AC Cobra which he will race Sunday in the Associated Sports Car Clubs of Hawaii program at Hawaii Raceway Park. Competition begins at 1 p.m. but there will be practice runs and time trials in the morning.

FUEL
LITE
WIPE
WASH
FAN
SPOT
FOG

Clockwise from main: trim windscreen has been added to race; *Honolulu Advertiser*, '64; simplicity is key to cockpit; a chance find enabled colour match

Clockwise from above left: famous badge; period V8 was sourced and installed; seats and lapbelt favour the car's original look over more modern lightweight kit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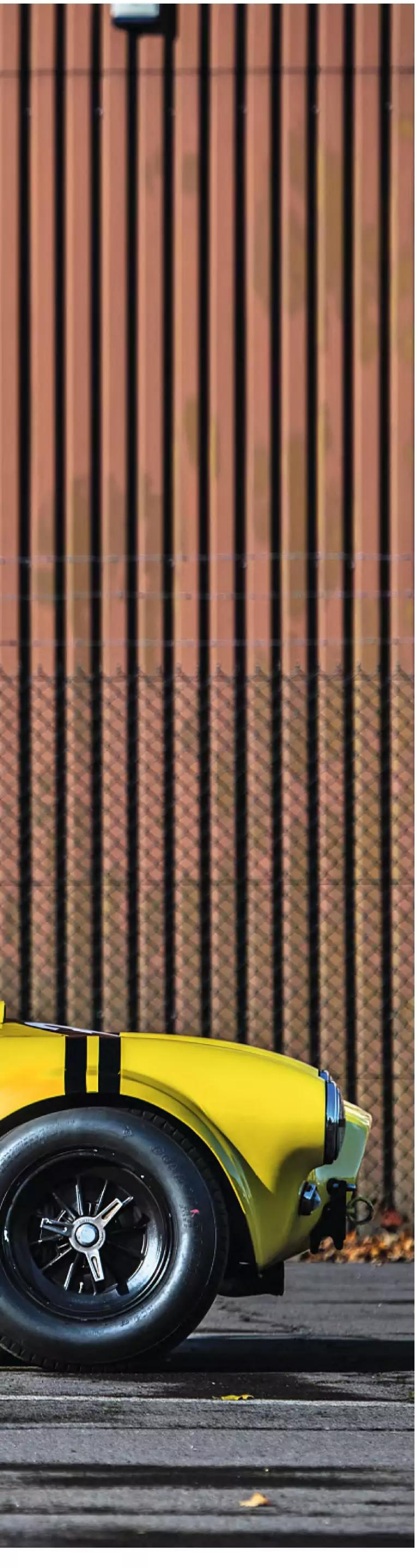
The Canary has sprouted a roll-hoop, so Bill Bridges sourced a factory hardtop and had it shaped to fit. Inset: Neil Jnr racing in the Pacific Northwest post-'66



"Before doing anything," Bill remembers, "I invited marque experts Nick Green and Robin Stainer to come and have a look. Once they were satisfied, the rebuild could begin. Provenance was always a big deal for me, and I wanted it to be absolutely unquestionable."

Being from the school of gentleman enthusiasts, Bill also wanted the Canary to be exactly as it was when it had raced on Hawaii. All of the modern tweaks, so common when prepping a Cobra for historic racing, were ignored. Those hard-to-find items that have since been deemed obsolete by today's results-driven hotshoes were painstakingly searched for. From major components, such as a genuine five-bolt (bellhousing) Hi-Po 289 engine, to period Shelby bucket seats, every detail was fastidiously researched and sourced.

Having been a racer all of its life, and never run on public roads, there was hardly any corrosion, as 'Big Al' Smith at Thunder Road found when he stripped the chassis for repainting. Likewise, Lawrence Kett of G&A Fabrications was able to retain all the original aluminium panelwork when refashioning the body back to its 1964 contours. Traces of the canary-yellow paint were found behind the dashboard, enabling a perfect match to the island livery. The dyed-black passenger seat, with original aircraft-style lapbelt, was retained even though discarding it would have saved weight and a few tenths.

Bill was enjoying the fruits of his labours within a year. But, while he had raced later cars without a 'screen and hardtop, to meet FIA and Goodwood TT rules the Canary would have to wear both. Rather than fit the now-ubiquitous Le Mans fastback hardtop that was only ever used on three cars in period, Bill found a factory version as used by the drag racers and had it modified to fit the single roll-hoop.

By the time I get behind the wheel the hardtop has been taken off, making getting in and out a lot easier. As racing cars go, the Cobra is nigh-on perfect. It is not sophisticated mechanically, and it is obviously a product of the previous century, but this works in its favour where weight – true enemy of racing – is concerned. There are no frills, no excess comforts. The doors, for instance, are small, with no external handles or window-winding mechanisms, so they weigh about the same as an E-type's ashtray. That windscreen barely has a frame – even an Elan has a thicker glassfibre surround; the dash is a minimal, flat one-piece and the cockpit lacks creature comforts.

OFF-THE-SHELF SHELBY RACERS

If racing one-man-bands such as Bill Bridges have found the modern era of historic racing intimidating, with highly modified cars at the cutting-edge of technology being run by teams of well-drilled mechanics, then imagine how Dick Neil Jnr and his ilk must have felt competing against Shelby and his Ford-sponsored steamroller in the booming sports car scene of the 1960s.

The factory built no fewer than 33 team cars in various guises, including the two 427cu in prototypes and six Daytona Coupes, racing not only in the international FIA GT championship, but also at home in both United States Road Racing Championship and SCCA A production competitions.

As a privateer, you would be hard pushed to race anywhere in the USA without encountering not only the latest incarnation of Cobra, but also the formidable talents of Ken Miles or Dave McDonald. Even in Hawaii or Nassau there was little respite: duffing up the locals was almost a spot of light relief for the 'works' outfit.

Such was Shelby's intent to obliterate the Corvette Stingray from the racing record books that even supposed independents Bob Johnson, Tom Payne and Dan Gerber were actually running factory-backed cars. One of the few who got close was Allen Grant, but he had the help of former Shelby engine builder Ole Olsen, who had been persuaded to join Coventry Motors and no doubt divulged industry secrets in the process.

Armed with a fistful of dollars, you could have the factory build 'one just like ours' to either European or US specification, which at least a dozen racers felt compelled to do. According to SAAC authority Rick Kopec in his 1982 book on the cars, only a further 28 buyers bought a road car as a fully fledged private entrant. In contrast to, say, the Lotus Elite, the factory entries outnumbered the true privateers.

The Cobra is left-hand drive, which leaves the driver's right foot with nowhere to go but on to the accelerator pedal due to the broad tunnel running fore to aft – which really is all you need to know. These cars are all about standing on the throttle, along with momentary use of the brake pedal. With the associated performance, and such a seductive sound emanating from the other side of the firewall, where else would you want to put your feet?

Rather than a single Holley, electric fuel pumps feed four twin-choke 48IDA Webers, whereby each cylinder in effect has its own venturi. Firing it up can be tricky, because it's easy to flood the engine with so much fuel sloshing about. But once it cackles into life everything seems to be right with the world. The Ford gearlever is semi-buried by the tall transmission tunnel, which acts as a perfect place to rest your right arm, particularly with such short throws. The T10 'box isn't the most sophisticated, but the changes are direct and the rare aluminium-cased versions are light. The remaining pedals inspire confidence: the brake always feels firm and consistent, and the clutch is extremely user-friendly once you have suffered the obligatory stall. It's not temperamental, and a trip to the shops would faze neither car nor driver, but really it is all about the throttle. How quickly you head towards the horizon, how much rubber is left behind or how much more you want the back end to step out is all down to the third pedal.

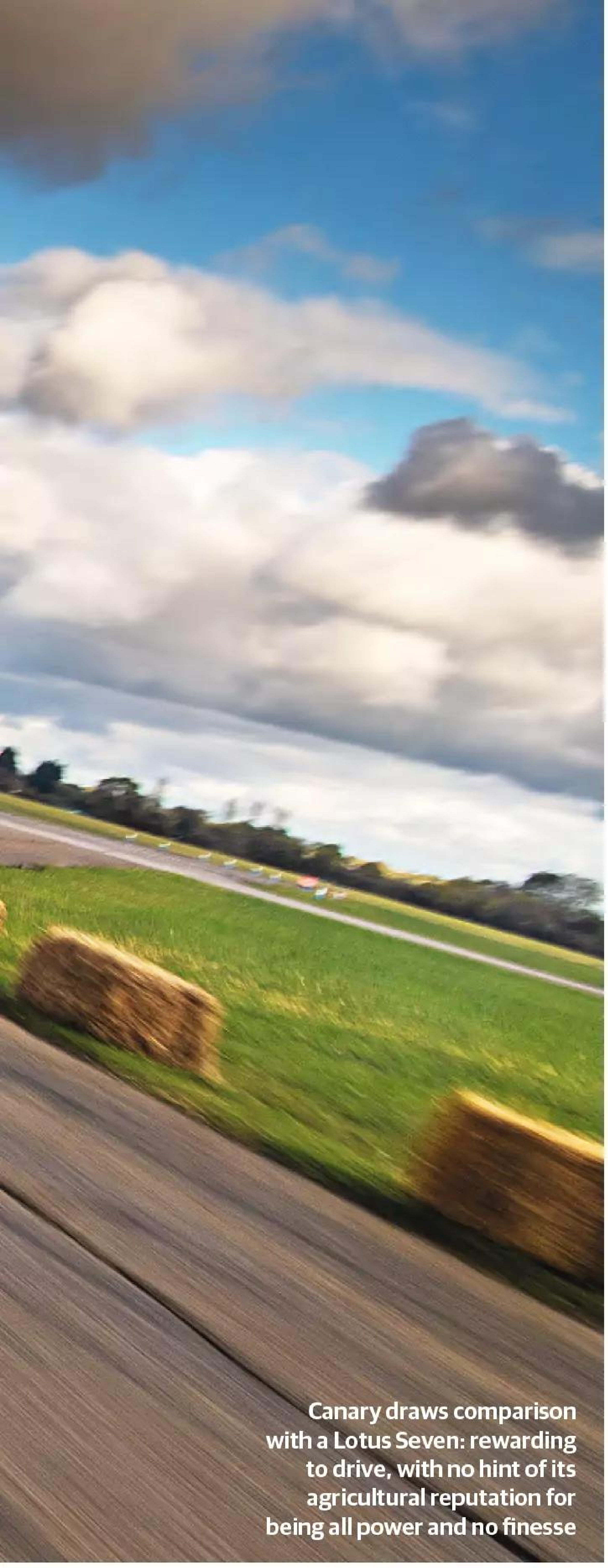
> *"Halfway through qualifying, Desiré Wilson unexpectedly came into the pits and handed me half of the throttle pedal"*

Folk often refer to Cobras as being muscular, aggressive machines lacking finesse, but in many ways it's a big-engined Lotus Seven, a high-powered roller skate. After a few circuits it's easy to appreciate how comfortably Shelby driver John Morton graduated from his Seven to a Cobra. The pair are equally rewarding to drive, albeit in different ways, and you wouldn't have a pulse if neither planted a smile on your face. But is it fast? Of course; it's an absolute flying machine, far faster than this driver could safely extract from it. With 450bhp powering a 1912lb shell, it's no wonder it can scoot around Goodwood in well under 90 seconds.

L-section Dunlops make the steering light and direct, despite the weight and proximity of the cast-iron V8 motor to the front axle. Legend has it that these cars need to be wrestled around corners, but this snake has fabulous turn-in and really is a pussycat – in the dry. The same combination in the wet is a different proposition, as I found out at worryingly low speed after a brief shower.

Bill was no stranger to Cobras, but it was with the Canary that he really learned his craft and formed a long-term relationship. It was kept at home in his Surrey garage, where he would spanner-check and service it between races. His pal Sam Smart often helped out with the major jobs, such as the end-of-season engine removal, but Bill was essentially one of that now near-extinct breed in historic racing: an owner/driver/mechanic.

Soon after the completion of its rebuild, the yellow Cobra and Bill were teamed with Desiré Wilson for their first assault on the Goodwood Revival. It would be a fraught but character-building baptism. Bill takes up the story: "Halfway through initial qualifying, Des came into the pits unexpectedly and handed me half



Canary draws comparison with a Lotus Seven: rewarding to drive, with no hint of its agricultural reputation for being all power and no finesse

of the throttle pedal. I had a good relationship with the boys at Uniclip – the Shepherds and their then-spannermen Steve and Kingsley – and despite also looking after the Bryants' red-and-gold Cobra [GPG 4C], ace welder Kingsley managed to repair the offending pedal in time for second qualifying on the Saturday. This was even less successful, because the Canary started to misfire and lose power halfway through the session. Sam and I inspected the valvetrain, but it was only once we got the heads off at around 11pm that we found a bit of piston missing. The Uniclip boys had long gone back to West Byfleet with GPG on a trailer, because that, too, had lunched its engine, but Bill [Shepherd] and Grahame [Bryant] were still up in the motorhome when we called in to say our race was run. Grahame said, 'You know, I've got another spare engine back at the workshop. You can use that if you want.' Sam and I arrived at Uniclip just as the boys were tightening the last bolt on GPG: 'Fancy doing another?' As the least competent of the crew, I was sent out to find a gallon drum of Red Bull and a ton of Mars bars. We got both Cobras back to the circuit and into the paddock with minutes to spare before the curfew."

All that hard work was rewarded by a top-10 finish in the car's first of 12 TTs. Bill continues: "Desiré was terrific, but I've been lucky with all of my Revival partners – David Franklin, Brian Redman, Stuart Graham. Stuart reckoned the Canary was the best car he ever drove at Goodwood. I was also fortunate enough to share the Canary with Sir Jack Brabham and Sir John Whitmore at the Festival of Speed. They were both disappointed that I didn't have a title as well, so they made me an honorary Baron for the weekend!"

Many other events followed, at home and abroad. "We were at the Silverstone Classic one year," Bill recounts, "when an American couple, Bill and Donna Sainsbury, asked about the car. It turns out he was a bit useful in his day and had shared the car with second owner Gary Hauser, giving him tuition in the process. It was exactly as he remembered it."

There was a memorable trip to South Africa in 2007, where Bill contested the Springbok races and finished second overall. But top of the list of favourite events came five years later, when he flew the Canary to California for the Cobra anniversary celebrations at Laguna Seca. Unlike most competing cars that are delivered to the circuit in huge artics, displayed under massive awnings and fawned over by mechanics in matching shirts, Bill naïvely had the car delivered to the circuit thinking there would at least be a Le Mans Classic or Goodwood-style tent for shelter. When he and wife Caroline, plus Sam and Linzi Smart, arrived, the yellow Cobra was sitting in the middle of the sun-drenched paddock with just two spare wheels and a tool roll. "Caroline was chatting to a guy who was intrigued by what we were doing," says Bill. "Before we knew it, we had the run of his truck, trailer, awning and tools – he even leant us some tyres!

"It was a magical weekend. Everyone was so friendly, and the fact we were the only ones to come from England made us minor celebrities. Two weeks later we were back at Goodwood."

The Hairy Canary has now found a new owner who, like those before him, is itching to go racing. The UK's circuits haven't seen the last of this charismatic snake.

Thanks to *Pendine (07770 762751; pendine.com)*

'HAIRY CANARY'
36
SHELBY
AR 36

Clockwise from above left: Bill fixed a previous owner's cutting of the wheelarches; cabin is without luxury; Halibrands replace original wheels

12
GT
12

"It's a beast!"

So says Indy 500 winner Kenny Bräck of the sensational 198mph Shelby Cobra Daytona that has gone on to star at Goodwood. A test drive confirms its reputation

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **MALCOLM GRIFFITHS**

"Would you rather have the Cobra Daytona Coupe over a Ferrari 250GTO?" asks one of my friends after listening to me babbling on about a recent drive of the rarest and most valuable of the Shelby family. It's a tough choice between these fabled rivals from the '64 and '65 seasons, the swansong of the great GT era when sports-racers still had close links to road cars. Irrational I know, but it has to be the Ford V8-powered machine. Since I was a lad, its blend of muscular looks, exotic rarity and brutal performance has gripped me. Enthusiasts are spoilt today, but I didn't see a Daytona Coupe until I was in my 30s. I had all of the books and models, knew the chassis numbers off by heart and never tired of the captivating story of the coupé's 1963 birth, led by Pete Brock against resistance within the Shelby camp. Combine that magnetic appeal with the one of the most colourful rivalries in racing and I can't help but root for the Guardsman Blue, white-striped upstart that dared to challenge the might of Ferrari.

As I slip my hand through the open side window to find the door catch of CSX2300 – the fourth built of the dramatic set – all of that charisma conjures a wealth of images, from the determined development in Shelby's cramped Venice Beach facility to its final FIA race at Enna, right in the heart of Mafia country.

The aluminium door is flyweight, and it's a struggle to contort yourself into the basic Caterham bucket race seat that has replaced the original padded-vinyl design. Inside it's dark, with a black-painted satin finish, five instruments – Smiths rev counter with Stewart-Warner ancillaries all to the right of the wheel – and a phalanx of toggle switches on the wide centre console. It's stark compared with the glamorous, extrovert exterior. With a clear view through the wide 'screen and slim pillars down the long bonnet, it's all logical, purposeful and surprisingly roomy. Brock ensured that it fitted everyone from stocky Davey MacDonald to sinewy expat Ken Miles. Pedals pivot from the floor, their AC logos acknowledging the origins of the chassis that was built in Thames Ditton before shipment to California. AC Cars billed Shelby American £363 for CSX2300 before it was air-freighted to LA. There the frame was stiffened with a triangulated scuttle subframe and a simple rollover bar behind the seats.

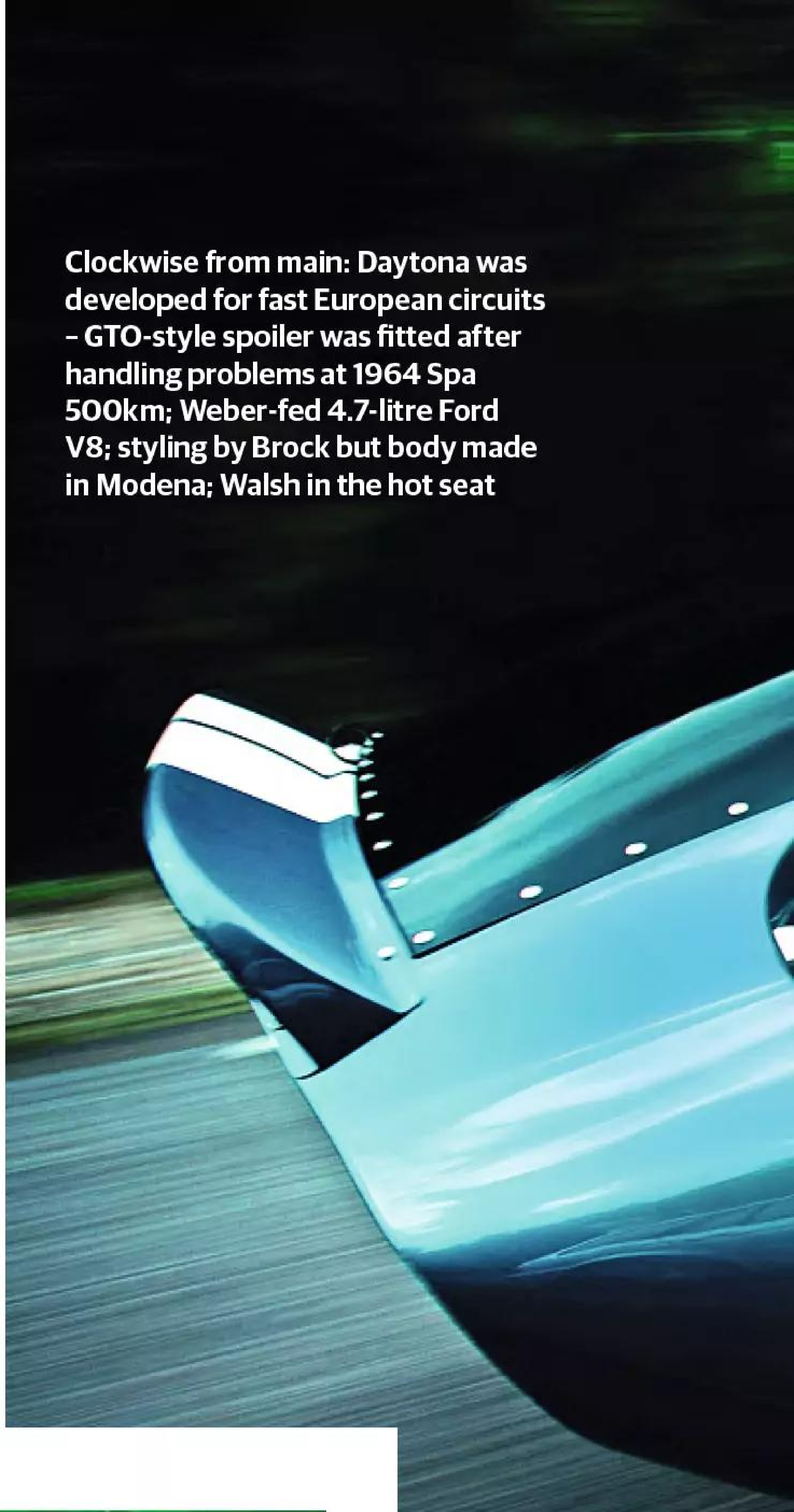
The wood-rimmed wheel is a smaller replacement item with an extended boss, because CSX2300's modern-day drivers Tom Kristensen and Kenny Bräck demanded more room and sharper response from the rack-and-pinion steering. The cockpit is tighter and safer than it was for the likes of Bob Bondurant, Jochen Neerpasch, Jo Schlesser and Sir John Whitmore, who all raced this very chassis. There's now a beefy rollcage with four-point harness. Amazingly, no one has ever been seriously injured in a Daytona Cobra, despite its fearsome 198mph performance.

Firing up requires just three switches: fuel pump, ignition then starter. Quickly the greedy downdraught 48IDA Webers feed the simple iron-block pushrod V8, and it erupts into life with a wild roar that rocks the car and blasts out under the sill in front of those magnificent Halibrand wheels. A Cobra roadster sounds spectacular on side pipes, but being strapped into this 2300lb coupé doubles the intensity of that wicked volcanic din. Floor the throttle and it sounds like a steam-hammer at full tilt.

The awesome performance matches that aural drama, and it is easy to appreciate the 4.4 secs 0-60mph time that *Car and Driver* clocked in '66 as you rocket through the cogs. The short gearing and instant torque will easily get the tail snaking as you yank the stubby T-10 gearlever across the H-gate. Invasive heat and rumble all add to the sensations of the Daytona's spectacular launch. Kenny's smoky, slithering take-offs at the Goodwood Festival of Speed matched an IndyCar burnout. You never see that from a 250GTO.

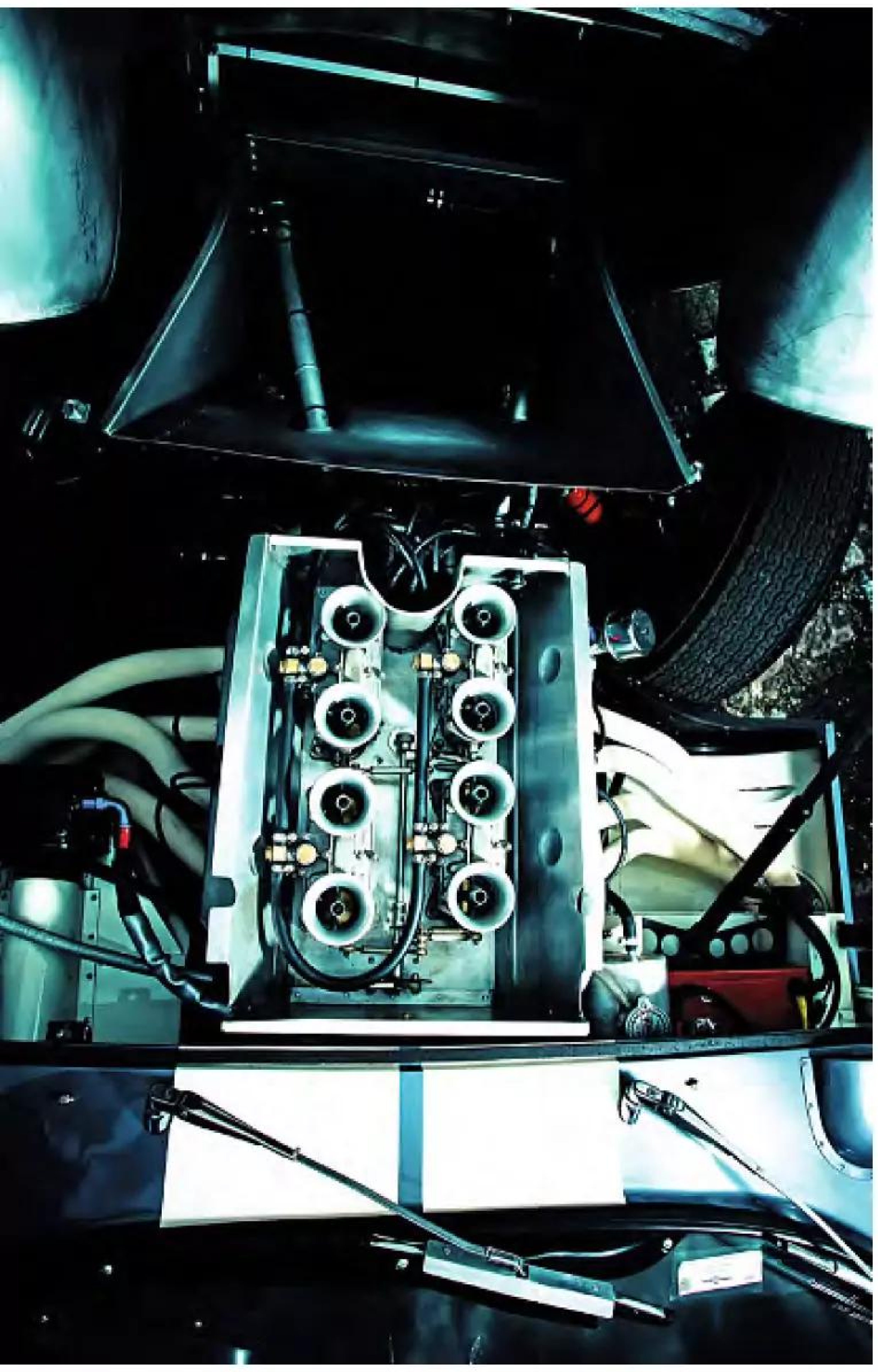
The action of the smaller wheel is heavy when manoeuvering, but lightens as the pace builds. You have to grip the rim strongly because the messages back from the road are clear, but the sharp mechanism goads you on. The stiffer chassis delivers a tauter feel than a roadster, yet, as Kenny confirms, you can still feel the flimsy tubular frame twist under heavy load in fast turns, despite the extra bracing. But as Jack Sears, who raced CSX2300 at Reims, recalls: "It was a big step forward over

Clockwise from main: Daytona was developed for fast European circuits – GTO-style spoiler was fitted after handling problems at 1964 Spa 500km; Weber-fed 4.7-litre Ford V8; styling by Brock but body made in Modena; Walsh in the hot seat



12
GT
64
Daytona

"You'd just grit your teeth in a roadster. The coupe was fun"
JACK SEARS



the roadster. With that you'd just grit your teeth and get on with it, but the Coupe had good handling and was fun to drive."

With 390bhp, it's easy to unstick the rear to balance the initial understeer, but it doesn't have a Ferrari's composure. Rather than a progressive drift, it's more of a fight through the corners – and it's way more physical. The brakes take a hefty push, and the clutch demands more muscle. You soon cook in a modern Nomex suit, and beads of sweat are running down my forehead after a few laps. It must have been stifling on the prototype's debut at Daytona. "It's a beast, but in a positive way," says Kenny. "With so much horsepower and little brakes, it requires lots of improvisation. Roadholding is a constant battle."

I could have carried on until the tank ran dry, but the riotous exhaust limits our run. Driving on the road with the original race system would soon get you stopped now, but that's how CSX2300 ran its first race on 11 September '64 in the Tour de France. The 10-day enduro featured eight races and eight hillclimbs with 3600 road miles, including challenging traffic. Reliability was crucial, because lateness to any control meant instant disqualification. With three events left in the season – Monza, the Tour de France and Bridgehampton – the contest was wide open in the 1964 FIA GT Championship. Shelby and Ferrari both needed two wins to secure victory. Shelby was confident he had the edge in Italy, with the Cobras' superior performance giving an advantage at Monza, but at the last minute came the staggering news that the event had been cancelled over a homologation issue relating to the 250LM. His crafty rival had pulled a fast one, but Shelby refused to give in and teamed up with John Wyer to run three Daytonas in France. A fourth was planned, but wasn't completed in time.

The odds looked tough, with Ferrari entering eight 250GTOs, but Shelby fielded a strong team: '62 Tour winner André Simon paired with Maurice Dupeyron in the prototype CSX2287, and retired GP ace Maurice Trintignant taking over Le Mans GT class-winner CSX2299. 'Our' car was entered for Bob and young German Neerpasch, who drove the whole Tour in a hire car before the event, but the American wasn't happy taking the newly finished Daytona. "I wanted to run my old Le Mans car because I knew the bugs had been worked out," he says, "but Carroll said 'the new car will last longer'." The boss would regret his decision.

The Tour started well. Neerpasch took an easy win at Reims, where he also set the fastest lap. As the rally headed for the German border, the Cobras topped the leaderboard, but then the problems started, with first CSX2300's exhaust breaking off, then a window falling out. "We lost 20 minutes," Bob adds, "and had to

“Even in road trim on the Tour de France, we did 185mph”
BOB BONDURANT

haul ass on the road. We were one of the last cars, and had to fight all of the spectator traffic – running 150mph down a two-lane road.” The next stage was the Bramont hillclimb, which was held at night. By the time the Cobra roared away, the road was covered in dirt and rocks. “I was sideways everywhere and thought I’d blown it, but it turned out we’d won,” says Bob.

Then their luck ran out. Bob’s throttle cable broke during the race at Rouen, leaving Trintignant to head a Shelby 1-2. Stranded on the circuit, Bob opened the bonnet and turned up the idle screws with a 1-franc coin before limping to the finish. It’s a major job to replace the cable on a Daytona, but John Ohlson managed it. Without any jacks, the loyal mechanic drove up on to a wheel to get under the car. With no time left to refuel and change tyres, Bob was forced to stop for petrol at a local garage, only to find that they had no money. Once the car was brimmed, they had no option but to drive away, because neither teammate could speak French.

Neerpasch said the chase to get to Le Mans through holiday jams was one of the hairiest rides of his life. Any hopes of victory faded during the two-hour race around the full circuit, as a disintegrating clutch broke the crank when the car was lying second, and leader Trintignant was forced to pit with a puncture. Simon pushed on until he also suffered engine failure at Cognac, but by then the team was demoralised and exhausted after long hours spent trying to keep the Daytonas running. With 250GTOs first and second, Ferrari had secured the championship. Shelby would take revenge the following year, but only after Enzo had withdrawn after the FIA’s refusal to homologate the 250LM.

Bob has fond memories of the Daytona Coupe, and he is proud of his ’64 Le Mans GT class win with Dan Gurney. “With improved aerodynamics and reinforced chassis, the Daytona still oversteered and understeered but not as badly,” he explains. “In practice, we calculated that the Daytona would run 198mph down the Mulsanne. Even in road trim on the Tour de France, we were doing 185mph. That thing really hauled and I’d never been so fast.”

After only one race in Europe, CSX2300 was shipped back to Los Angeles, where it was rebuilt and repainted Guardsman Blue with wider whites stripes for ’65. Allen Grant and Ed Leslie took fifth at the Daytona Continental, and a month later the same pairing pounded around the bumpy Sebring airfield to claim 13th and third in the GT class. Back in Europe, CSX2300 was repainted yet again, but this time in the white with blue centre stripe and red edging of Ford France. The Nürburgring must have been a rough ride, though Frenchmen Schlesser and Simon kept it together to take

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COBRA
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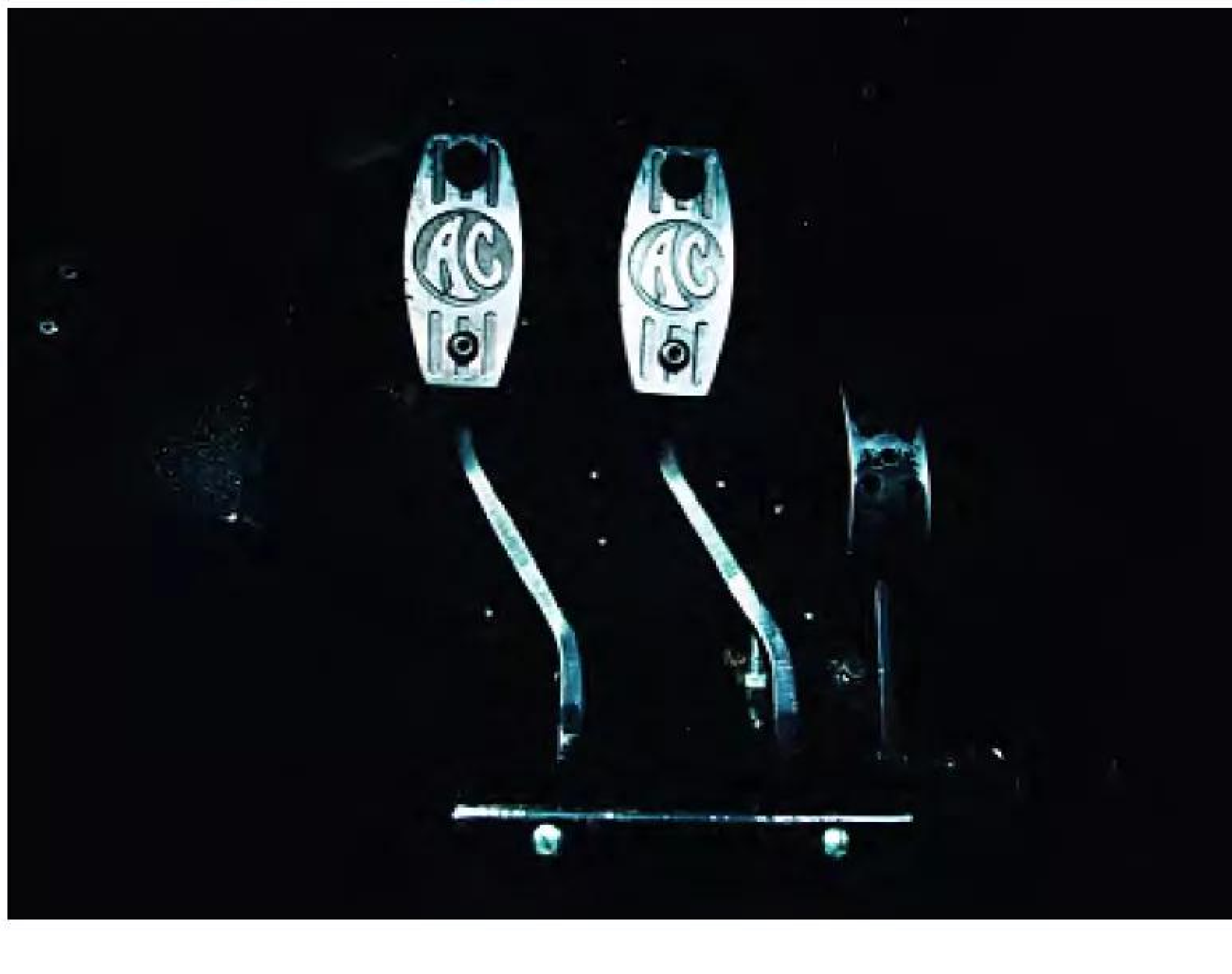


SHELBY COBRA DAYTONA COUPE

Sold/number built 1964-'65/six
Construction ladder-type steel tubular chassis with scuttle subframe and aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4727cc V8, four Weber 48IDA carburettors
Max power 390bhp @ 6750rpm
Max torque 341lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission Borg Warner T-10M four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, transverse leaf spring, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** discs
Length 12ft 7in (3835mm)
Width 5ft 1in (1549mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2300lb (1043kg)
0-60mph 4.4 secs
Top speed 198mph **Mpg** n/a
Price new n/a

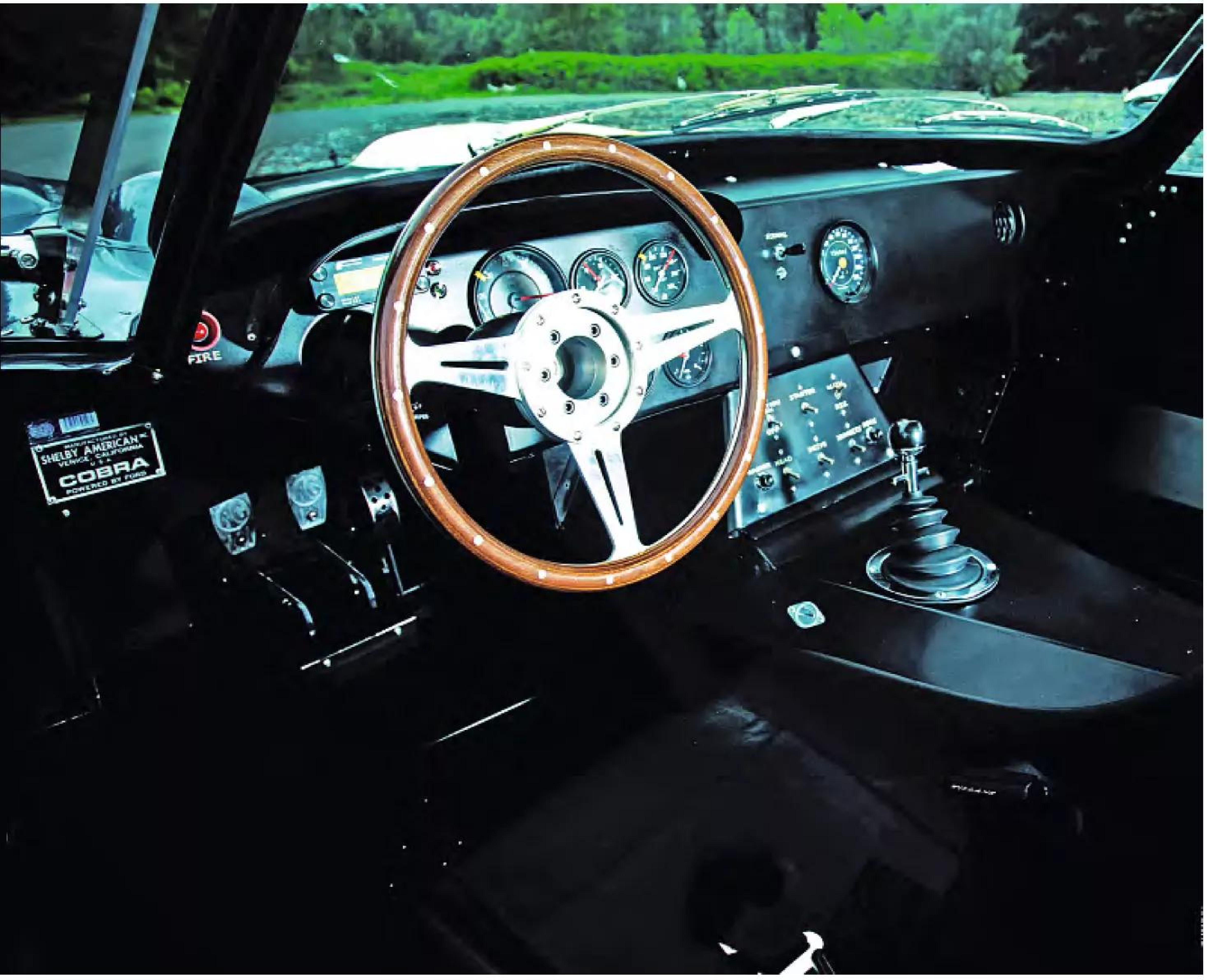
12th overall and third in the GT class. Next to drive CSX2300 was the trusted British duo of Sears and Whitmore, who impressed in the Reims 12 Hours, blasting around the fast road circuit through the night to take second in class. The French race was the last before CSX2300 was shipped home, where it was kept as a spare at Shelby American.

Eventually, at the famous 'garage sale' at the end of March 1966, the car was snapped up for $4000 by Polish enthusiast Oscar Koveleski, who set up *Auto World* and helped kickstart Can-Am racing. Koveleski didn't keep it long, selling swiftly to Shadow founder Don Nichols. In '66, Nichols was director of NASCAR racing in Japan, where he shipped the Daytona. Local hotshoe Tadashi Sakai couldn't resist the car and talked Nichols into parting with it. Sakai was running second on his dramatic debut in the Japanese GP at Fuji Raceway until engine problems close to the finish forced retirement.

After appearing in several enduros, the engine blew, and the car was bought at one point with the intention of building a single-seater. Thankfully Shin Yoshikawa, a young Cobra fan, was horrified when he heard of the plan to chop up the Coupe. He managed to scrape together the $3000 to rescue it. Another problem arose when the student discovered that the Daytona's temporary import time had expired, and if not re-registered it would be crushed. Unfortunately, such red tape required the Cobra to be a runner, so, after searching Japanese scrapyards, Yoshikawa found a tired 302cu in motor with an auto 'box. Once the paperwork was complete, though, he had no option but to sell to pay back everyone who had helped him to finance the project.

CSX2300 vanished for a decade until Shelby designer Brock got word that the Daytona had appeared at a small used-car dealership in Tokyo. Cobra authority Mike Shoen brokered the deal and Shelby acquired it in '75. Long overdue for restoration, the Daytona was entrusted to Cobra specialist Mike McCluskey, and finally emerged from his LA shop in 1983.

Over the following 15 years, CSX2300 was the centrepiece in various museums and at Cobra events before it was sold (reputedly without Shelby's knowledge) to Jim Spiro, who used it on the street around his New Orleans home until he auctioned it in Monterey, where Larry Bowman paid $4.4million and repainted it in the white livery of Ford France. At the fantastic Shelby tribute during the Monterey Historics, CSX2300 returned to action in the hands of former Cobra ace John Morton, but it was back to classic Guardsman Blue for an entry in the 2004 Goodwood Tourist Trophy. Since '05, this great car has remained in Europe, where its enthusiastic German owner had historic racing specialist Dean Lanzante prepare it for a major challenge in last year's TT Celebration. Danish Le Mans legend Kristensen was teamed with IndyCar hero Kenny, and the star duo took an emphatic victory in torrential conditions against a field that included Martin Brundle in Nick Mason's 250GTO. No prizes for guessing which team I was shouting for.



Clockwise from main: body features air scoops for engine, brakes and cabin; the view most Ferrari drivers see; stripped cockpit with smaller wheel; AC badges are only on cast pedals; Shelby chassis plate

***Thanks to** Dean Lanzante (lanzante.co.uk); John Webb and Daniela Ellerbrock. This story was published in the September 2012 issue of C&SC, since when Jack Sears and Bob Bondurant have sadly passed away*

ART *imitating* ART

Are the copies a patch on the original Cobra?

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

If it's worth doing, it's worth overdoing. Carroll Shelby's Cobra never was a prudent, predictable, rule-bound exercise. The Texan former chicken farmer's race-bred firebrand ruled the performance roost during an epoch that knocked down the walls between buyers' expectations and reality. Think unbridled horsepower. Think pumped-up preternatural aggression. Think towering charisma. Think replicas.

Ah yes, the 'fake snakes', Cobra clones and repro reptiles. Time was when owners of the genuine article would cringe and recoil if an inquiry was made questioning its validity; nowadays, onlookers simply presume anything wearing a Cobra badge is a phoney. 'Cobra' has become a generic term, a flag of convenience for all manner of horrors and aberrations, misfits and miscreants. You could argue, then, with rile and reason, that such replicas have no business appearing in this magazine. But consider this: even motor racing's most famous Stetson-wearer has managed a nice line in duplicates. In glassfibre. In kit form. And if anyone has a right to cash in on the Cobra legend, it's Carroll Shelby.

But why the Cobra? Why, above all others, has this Anglo-American hybrid become the most copied car on the planet? Because it's everything you ever wanted a sports car to be – and then some. Before the shape was corrupted into the 427, the curvaceous Cobra effortlessly melded the subtle beauty of the Ace with the gnarled aggression of Stateside muscle. Whether it's in a sober burgundy riding on stove-enamelled knock-off wires, or, as here, aping the famous Alan Grant Coventry Motors yellow piledriver, the Cobra exudes magnetism. And it's the car's reputation as a devourer of the timid – the undisputed machine for heroes – that sets it aside from its contemporaries. Ironic, then, that the Cobra is less likely to bite you than legend will have you believe – as long as you pay due respect. With 380bhp or thereabouts, this example is a sweetheart. The suspension has yet to be set up properly and its gumball tyres foul the wheelarches, but it offers a driving experience bordering on rapture.

Just starting it is an event. You know exactly how it's going to sound. You only have to see a photo of a Cobra and a soundtrack is triggered in your psyche, but the reality is so much better.

'It makes promises you know it will deliver. Whatever the gear and whatever your speed, there's always more. It just barks and goes'

Even at idle, the 289cu in Ford V8 small-block, running on mighty 48IDA Webers, makes promises you just know it will deliver. And it does. Tenfold. Whatever the gear, whatever your speed, there's always more. It just barks and goes, propelling you to the horizon with an alacrity that makes your eyes stream. All the controls demand a firm hand: changes on the taut four-speeder, the unyielding clutch and the improbably communicative steering.

This is a physical car, yet it's utterly friendly, too. It wants to help you out. Sure, the rear end is a little bouncy over blemish-ridden blacktop, and should you desire a side order of thrills, the back can be persuaded to step out. But it's so manageable and has such a superfluity of aptitude that you leave craving for more power. Excess: nothing exceeds like it.

But as book-fondling data-chasers will tell you, the Cobra never was a strong seller back in its day. For all its success on the track, by the late 1960s you couldn't give them away. Odd, then, that it was at this juncture that the first faltering steps were made towards what has become a global counterfeiting ring that sees more copies made each year than AC and Shelby managed originals in seven. So at least a few of them should stand up to close scrutiny.

It's all down to personal sensibilities. The majority of replicas are anything but; liberties are taken with just about everything. If you want absolute accuracy, your options are limited. Should the only remit be that familiar outline, well, everyone is a winner. That is, if you don't mind the occasional deviation – bigger wheelarches, longer doors perchance,

or maybe a subtle variation of bonnet scoop. Oh, and most of the UK's many manufacturers only offer the unique-to-Britain MkIII body.

The other stumbling block – if it bothers you – is that fakes are tailored to suit their builders. It stands to reason, but herein lies the taste issue. Kit cars – and that's what they are, stigma and all – will always inspire a reaction. No Cobra in period came with ivory-coloured leather and red piping. Or a wooden dash. Or 18in split-rims. If you like that sort of thing, well fine. To those who are genuinely upset by what they perceive as a dilution of what made the original great, if less is more, most lookalikes could do with a little more less.

Such as this RAM. In straight black, with little embellishment, it appears almost sober, even if the overall lines aren't quite right. With a semi-spaceframe by Adrian Reynard and one-time endorsement by Shelby (his signature is on the badge), it promises much. Powered by a 351cu in Ford Windsor V8, this highly regarded Cobra rep is rapid despite a fairly mild state of tune. It's a competent package and makes all the right noises, yet on the track there's a tendency towards roll oversteer. The ludicrous width of the transmission tunnel prompts the already severely offset pedals to virtually overlap, which can catch you off guard. By his own admission, the current owner doesn't drive it especially hard, but there remains the nagging feeling that, despite its credentials (the marque has chalked up race wins in the French Bardahl series, among others), there's been too big a compromise made between comfort and handling.

Yet when you stop thinking of it as less of a Cobra and more of a RAM, the asking price seems almost reasonable. A car with this sort of performance is never going to be cheap, and it costs less than the sum of its parts. It's the value for money equation that raises more heckles from the anti-replica lobby, with some justification. Want a cheap Cobra? Would you prefer Volkswagen Beetle or Suzuki LJ power? While you're recovering from that sentence, just take comfort in knowing that neither option is likely to be encountered in Blighty. Instead, we have the Sierra-based fraud, your cheapest entry into the replica field. Except that a Pinto-powered Cobra is not a Cobra. It's a grass snake with delusions of grandeur.

By this rationale, the prospect of a wannabe using MGB running gear should be an abomination. The Hawk is the only British replica of the MkII/289, and it uses Abingdon's finest as a starting point. Designer Gerry Hawkridge is better known for his acclaimed Transformer Stratos replicas, but is equally well versed with Cobras, acting as supplier to AC and as a consultant on the Lotus-powered CRS. By his own admission, he's anal about accuracy, and, physically at least, there's little to tell the Hawk and the real deal apart.

'Each year more copies are made than AC and Shelby managed originals in seven. So a few of them should stand close scrutiny'

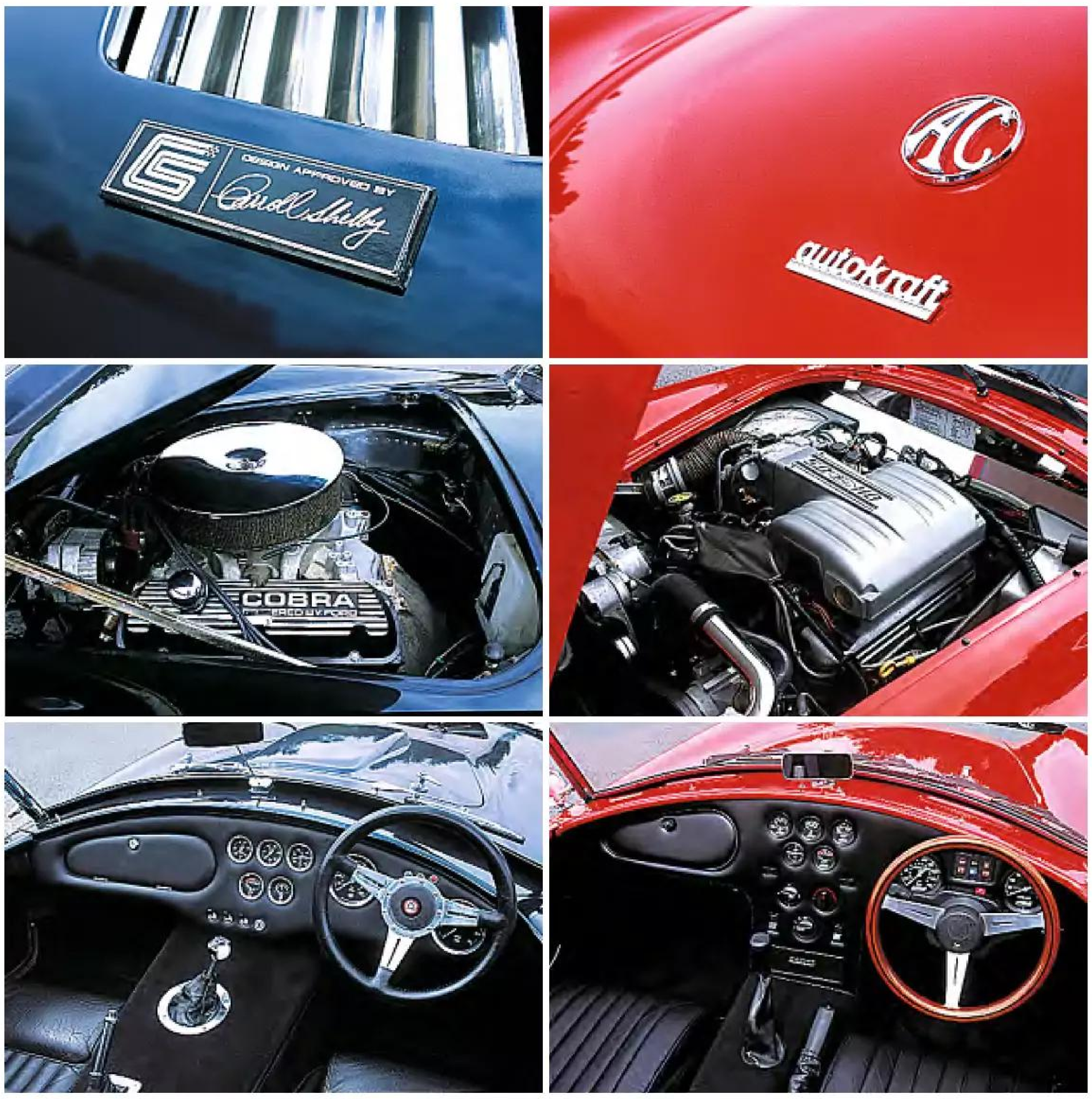
RAM RIDER WHO COVETS FORD V8s

The Cobra has been immortalised on vinyl and celluloid, and it was the latter that first drew Mark Thorne to Shelby's finest. "When I was a kid I saw *The Gumball Rally* and fell in love with the Cobra," he says. "I watched that film over and over again, and was hooked. I still sit down for a viewing from time to time."

A long-time classic fan, Mark is currently restoring a Jag MkII, but Ford-powered cars press all his buttons. He adds: "I love the Cobras, GT40s and Mustangs. I'd love to own a real Cobra, but it's out of my reach. That's why I bought the RAM. It has a Ford V8 – I wouldn't want one with a Rover or Chevrolet engine, that's just wrong – and is as close as I'm likely to get.' The RAM may shortly be joined by a *Bullitt* Mustang lookalike.

Construction Adrian Reynard-designed steel semi-spaceframe chassis, glassfibre body with crumple zones **Engine** all-iron, ohv 351cu in (5752cc) Ford V8, single four-barrel carburettor **Transmission** four-speed manual, RWD **Steering** rack and pinion **Brakes** discs, with servo **Suspension** Jaguar XJ-derived independent, at **front** by wishbones, coil springs, anti roll bar **rear** wishbones, driveshafts as upper links, radius arms, coil-over dampers

Signed by Mr Shelby, RAM once met with his approval; this blue car packs a 351cu in Ford. Chunky MkIV has the look, but motor muted by emissions equipment; modern switchgear

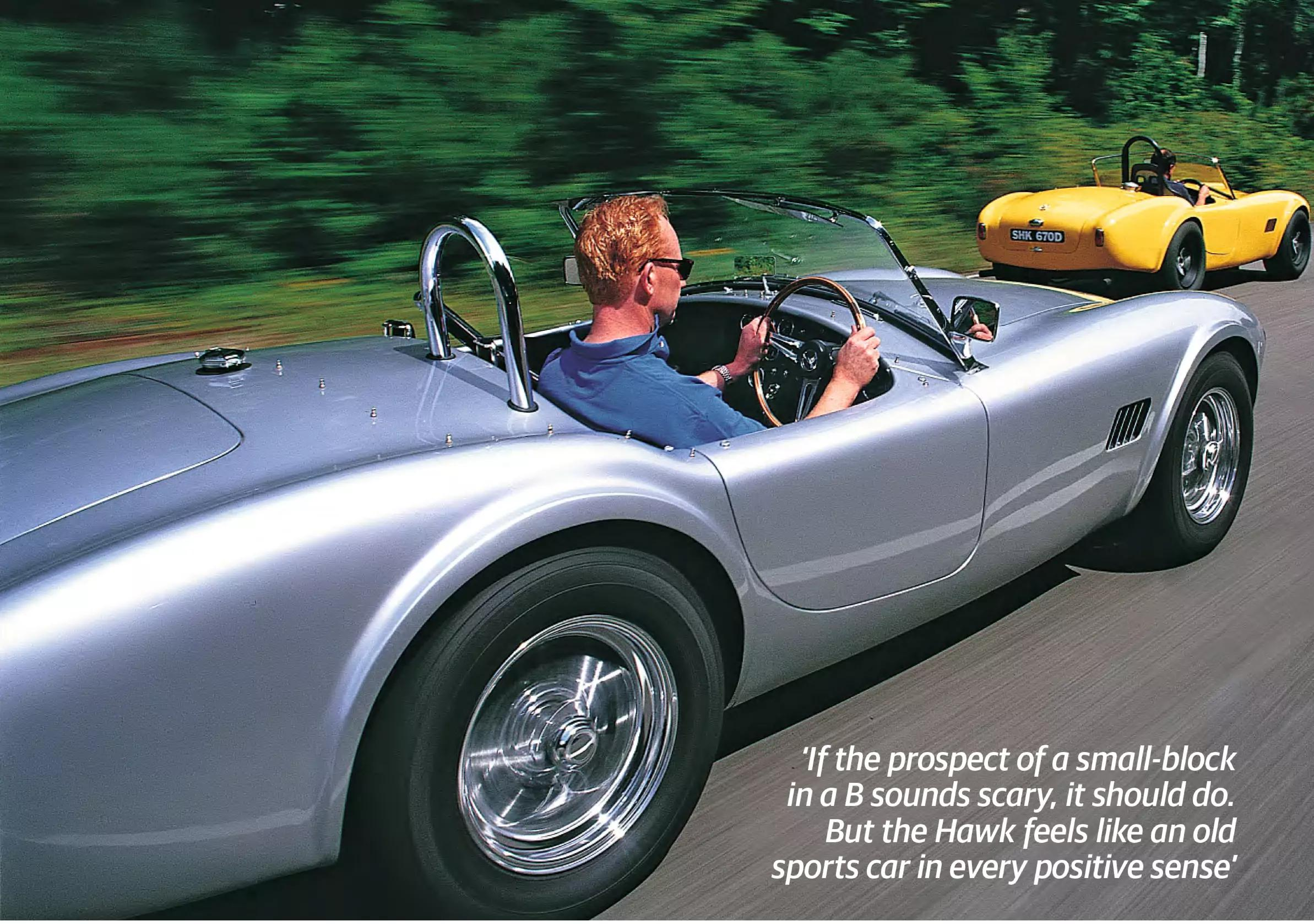


AUTOKRAFT GETS FULL MARKS

Sports car fan and racer Richard Walpole is clearly smitten with his AC. He says: "It's a good blend of old and modern, and can be driven to suit your mood. It's quite a docile old thing when you want it to be, but it's more than up for being driven hard. My daughter has taken it around Silverstone and had a great time. It's a friendly car, but obviously a powerful one."

He says it fits his brief as a real sports car, adding: "I've owned Invictas and Aston Martins and I like to feel as if I'm operating something rather than being cosseted. The MkIV is a real driver's car." And how does he feel about replicas? "When I was younger, and not necessarily in better shape financially, I would probably have been tempted," he admits. "But if you can afford it, always go for the real thing.'

Construction twin-tube steel frame with hoops and cross-bracing, aluminium body **Engine** all-iron, ohv 302cu in (4949cc) Ford V8, with sequential electronic fuel injection **Transmission** five-speed Borg-Warner T5 manual, RWD **Steering** rack and pinion **Brakes** discs **Suspension** independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, Bilstein shock absorbers f/r



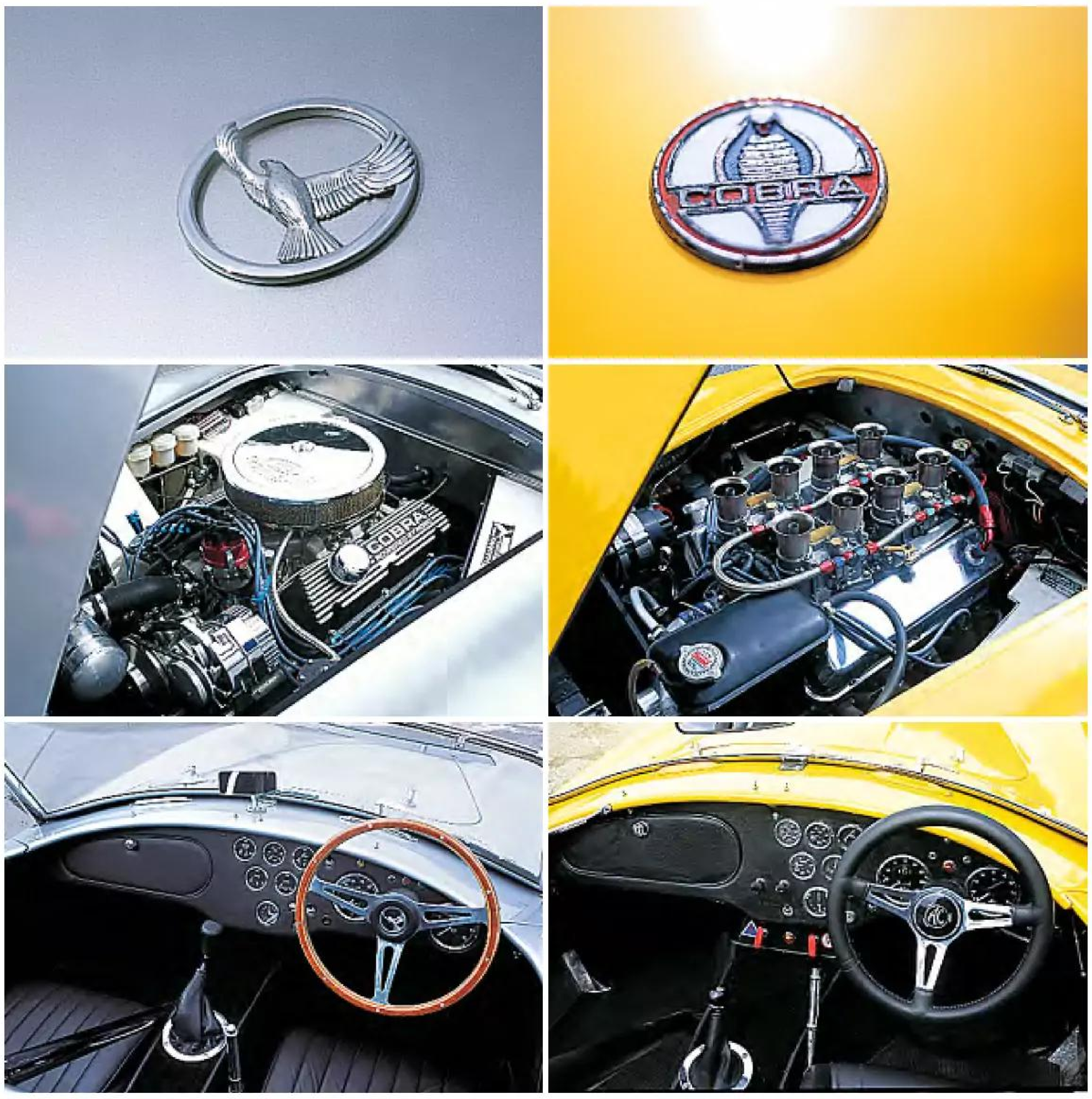
'If the prospect of a small-block in a B sounds scary, it should do. But the Hawk feels like an old sports car in every positive sense'

HAWK FLYER LOVES THE MACHINE

Long-time Hawk customer Phil Jordan isn't a hardcore Cobra fan, despite his appreciation of the legend: he became involved with the marque through the firm's Stratos replicas. Seen here with Hawk's former demonstrator, he's clear about why the car appeals. "It looks right," he says. "Gerry [Hawkridge] tries to get things as close to original as is practical. It makes all the right noises and is lovely to drive. It cost £18,000, and it's well worth that. It's a fast sports car and beautifully made. What else can you buy for this money that looks as good and goes as well?" Does the 'kit car' stigma bother him? He says: "People don't look at machines like this and think 'kit car'. There is no real stigma.'

Construction round-tube steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv 302cu in (4949cc) Ford V8, single four-barrel carb (other Ford and Rover V8s optional)
Transmission four-speed T10 manual, RWD
Steering MGB rack and pinion **Brakes** discs front, drums rear (all-disc optional) **Suspension: front** independent, by MGB-derived double wishbones, coil springs **rear** MGB live axle (Hawk all-round independent optional, by adjustable tubular double wishbones or Jaguar XJ)

Hawk or snake? Beautifully made silver replica is faithful to the original on the outside – even more so in the cabin. Bill Bridges' monster MkII racer is good for 380bhp on 48IDA Webers



The chassis is a similar, steel twin-rail arrangement, with the B's widgetry modified with Spax adjustables among other tweaks. And it works – better than it has any right to, given the componentry's humble origins.

If the prospect of a small-block in a B sounds scary, it should do, but the engine is mounted 6in further back relative to the donor, and the car is hugely entertaining to drive for all the right reasons. The ride is uncommonly supple; mild understeer is its natural cornering attitude, yet it's possible to adjust for oversteer with just a dab of the throttle. The situation is helped by the nicely weighted steering, which, although a touch nervous at lower speeds, tightens progressively. All the more remarkable when you consider that it's a modified B rack. The Hawk feels like an old sports car in every positive sense. And how much will this bundle of fun cost? About the same as a family hatchback.

But it isn't a Cobra. For all of Gerry's commendable attention to detail – an alien concept for most copyists – it doesn't have the aura of the real thing. The Hawk does, though, give a glimpse into the Cobra's soul, having been executed with passion and considerable style.

Highly laudable, but if you want something that's more than an approximation, there's always the Autokraft MkIV. There is a premium over a top-flight clone, yet this buys you a car with a (slightly skewed) lineage back to the '60s icon. These AC-badged roadsters were Ford-sponsored and wear alloy shells, made on the original body jigs. So more credibility than any copy for that.

Visually, the MkIV takes off pretty much where the MkIII left off, although Type Approval diktats make it more contemporary. Similarly, the cabin is awash with modern switchgear, which only heightens this impression. More telling is the way it drives. The 302cu in V8 sounds oddly muted, spayed by emission-friendly silencers. The rumble is still there, but it remains just that. Even when pressing on, the MkIV sounds gutted of aggression, yet it is far from a foot-dragger. Mid-range acceleration is eye-widening, the fifth cog adding a touch of refinement.

You don't want a Cobra to be refined, though, and the MkIV feels suitably archaic where it matters. The ride quality is firm, making for slightly choppy progress, and all three pedals require a hefty shove. The gearchange, too, is close-coupled and ponderous. Only the steering – light, but none the worse for that – seems foreign. It really is quite lovely.

But it's no MkII. The icon. The daddy. No replica can match it for charisma or kudos. But only if you're defined by your snobbishness can you chastise enthusiasts without pots of cash for owning recreations. Not everyone is in a position to fork out six figures for the real thing, and there aren't enough to go around anyway. The fact that the replica marketplace has yet to reach saturation point indicates a simple fact: they're popular. Fakes are just that – nobody will ever be fooled. But imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, after all.

YELLOW PERIL IS BACK IN TRIM

One of Britain's most successful Cobra racers, Bill Bridges had just finished restoring his fabulous yellow MkII prior to our photoshoot. "This is the furthest it's been and we haven't really set it up yet," he says. "It's the third car that I've built with Big Al (an ace fabricator at Uniclip Automotive). After I sold my previous AC (as featured in *C&SC*, January 2001), it had to be a narrow-bodied car. It's a lovely shape, which is what got me into Cobras in the first place."

Bill's Cobra racing career began with his famous yellow MkIV, which had an influence. He adds: "We found layer on layer of paint when stripping the car, and did put some thought into what would look best after the blue MkIII. The thing is, I like yellow." And what does the Cobra tamer drive every day? "A Smart," he smiles.

Construction twin-tube steel frame, aluminium body **Engine** all-iron, ohv 289cu in (4735cc) Ford 'Hi-Po' V8, single four-barrel carburettor **Transmission** four-speed manual, RWD **Steering** steering box, or rack-and-pinion on later cars (as here) **Brakes** discs **Suspension** independent, by double wishbones, transverse leaf spring f/r

MiG-BUILT DOPPELGÄNGER FLIES TO THE UK

The Kirkham is the only literal Cobra replica, and it is now available in the UK – and it's fantastic. Gerry Hawkridge of Hawk Cars, who has been involved with the American-financed project for the past two years, says: "Every component is interchangeable with a real Cobra, but the Kirkham parts are made to a higher standard at the MiG aircraft factory in Poland. Chassis are Tig-welded and millimetre perfect to aircraft tolerances. The forged uprights are made with the same integrity as the MiG fighter's landing gear. Basically, all the might of aerospace technology has been thrown at this car."

Despite having covered just 28 miles, and with dire warnings from a pensive Gerry that the tracking has yet to be done and the tyres are all wrong, the Kirkham proves to be a mighty performer straight out of the box. With its 289cu in V8 giving a conservative 250bhp, it's far from an animal in spite of the occasional twitch from the back. It all feels balanced and prodigiously fast: much like a Cobra.

This is about as close to the Anglo-American icon as you're ever likely to get without having to dig way deep. Not that it's cheap, though: a body-chassis unit will set you back £18,950*, landed. On top of that, you'll probably have to spend another £20,000* for the period-perfect bits – a factory-built car will set you back £75k* – but that's still some way less than a top MkIV.

*PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

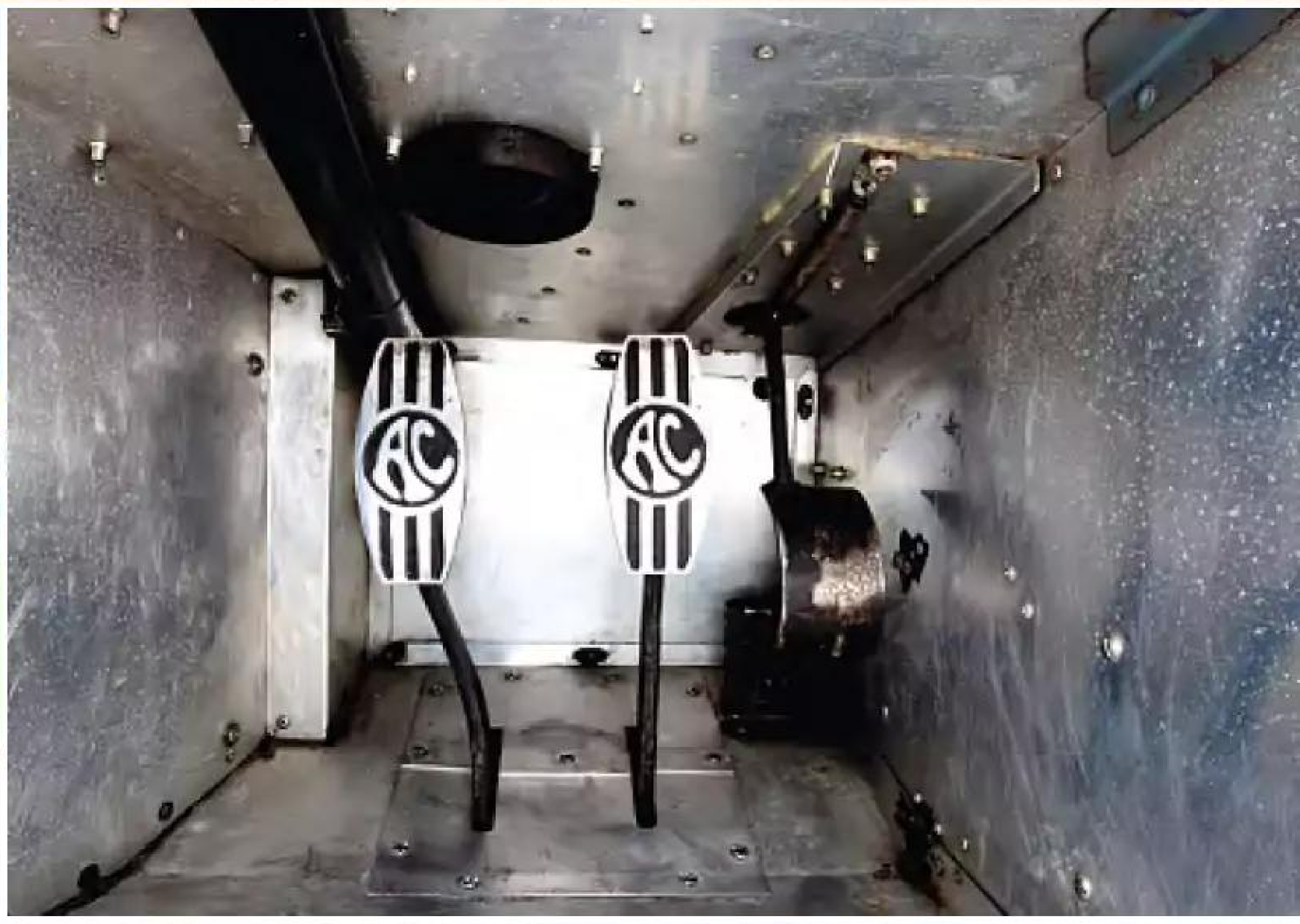
“I wound it up until the needle wouldn’t climb any further: 6500rpm. The boffins said I’d been holding 185mph”

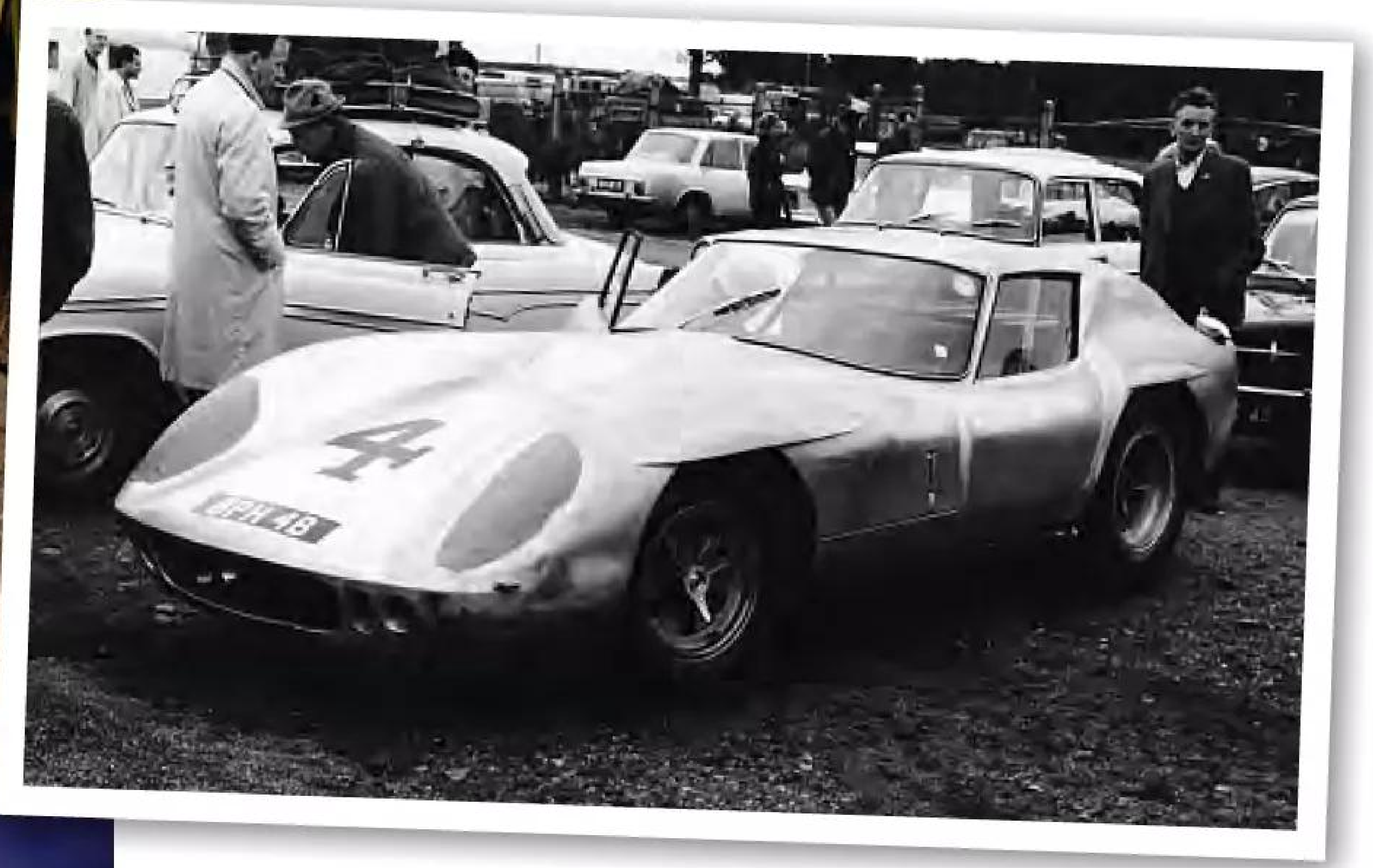
And that was on the M1! Jack Sears is reunited with A98, the unique, AC-built Cobra coupé

WORDS **SIMON TAYLOR** PHOTOGRAPHY **MALCOLM GRIFFITHS**

'A98 was timed at 181.4mph on the Mulsanne and was one of only two GTs to do a sub-four-minute lap'

Clockwise: cockpit used standard Cobra wheel and segment tacho; cast-alloy pedals were an AC trademark; Goodyears on Halibrand wheels; purposeful front profile





A98's body was drawn by AC's in-house designer, Alan Turner, and made in alloy by Maurice Gomm. Right: A98 in bare metal mingles with Simcas at Le Mans Test Day in '64

Motor racing is full of might-have-been tales. Many a great car has been snuffed out too soon by ill fortune, to become no more than a footnote in history. Alternatively, it may be remembered for the wrong reasons: not for what it could have achieved, but for how it was ensnared by unfortunate circumstance.

That's how it is for the beautiful coupé you see here. Known only by its internal design drawing number of A98, it was completed in AC's little Thames Ditton works in April '64. Eight weeks after that it made headlines in every newspaper in Britain in a scandalous national controversy; just 10 days later it was wrecked in a tragic crash at Le Mans. Its dismantled remains were hidden away in the factory and forgotten – until a determined enthusiast persuaded AC's then owners, the Hurlocks, to let him bring A98 back to life. The ensuing labour of love took 12 years.

In 1964, the battle between Ferrari and Carroll Shelby's Cobras for the World GT Manufacturers' Championship was in full swing. The Cobra had the horsepower, thanks to its pushrod 4.7 V8, but it was a crude device, its ladder frame and transverse-leaf suspension clothed in simple roadster bodywork that, ironically, had its roots in the *barchetta* Ferraris of 15 years earlier. Clearly a more slippery body would bring more speed, so Shelby's man Pete Brock designed a coupé shape that was more dramatic than beautiful, and it was ready for the 1964 Daytona race in February. In all, six Daytona Coupes were built, playing a major role in Shelby's 1965 GT title.

AC didn't have a competition programme but ran a near-standard Cobra at Le Mans in 1963. Driven by Peter Bolton and Ninian Sanderson, it finished seventh and won its class. For 1964 Alan Turner, the quiet and unsung but highly talented designer at AC, got Derek Hurlock's go-ahead to build his own idea of how a racing Cobra should be. If successful, it would be the first of a batch of 12 built for sale to racing customers. The chassis layout and running gear were unchanged, but the additional tubing to carry the more aerodynamic coupé body was also designed to instil extra rigidity. From Turner's drawings, aluminium wizard Maurice Gomm shaped the sublime shell, with elegant nose, hunched rear quarters, Kamm tail and strakes over each wheel. An entry was put in for Le Mans, with top British Cobra racer Jack Sears signed up to co-drive with Bolton.

Looking back several decades later, Jack remembers: "The coupé was barely finished in time for the Le Mans test weekend in April, and it ran there unpainted, just as a shakedown. Peter Bolton drove it, because I was at Aintree that weekend racing Willment's Cobra roadster and Galaxie. We still didn't know if it was fast enough, or how stable it would be at speed. We ran it at MIRA in May, but the banking there limits you to 165mph. Then we realised that the M1 would be the perfect place. It was by then early June, with long days and short nights, so we hatched a plan to meet up at the Blue Boar Services on Wednesday 10 June at 4am. The car was taken there on a truck, unloaded among the lorry drivers supping their cups of tea, and warmed up. Then off I went. In those days, at that hour, you could go a long way on the M1 without seeing another car. I wound it up for some miles and the rev-counter needle climbed until it wouldn't go any further – 6500rpm. It felt perfectly secure at that speed. I peeled off onto a sliproad, over a bridge and back down the other side to the Blue Boar.

"The boffins got out their slide rules, factored in the tyres' rolling diameter and gearing and said I'd been holding 185mph. I said: 'Really? That's splendid. That's the fastest I've ever been.' By then a couple of policemen had stopped at the Services and were looking at the car. But they made no adverse comment, they were just interested. We weren't breaking any laws. I didn't tell them what speed I'd done. Peter Bolton had a run and came back with a big smile on his face, and then they loaded up the car. I was home in Norfolk by 7:30am, had breakfast and got on with my farming day.

"Then the phone started ringing. Derek Hurlock's nephew Tony Martin, who'd come to the Blue Boar to watch, worked on the admin side of a national newspaper. Over lunch at a Fleet Street wine bar he told a friend that he'd seen his uncle's car do 185mph on the M1 that morning. Some journalist had his ears flapping and the story hit the media like a bombshell. Suddenly there were headlines in every paper, questions were asked in the House, RoSPA issued a statement saying what the stopping distance was from 185mph, the lorry drivers' union made a complaint; it went on and on. I did my best to play the whole thing down, and in the end I just stopped answering the phone."

Jack still made no comment when the story resurfaced in 1966 as Minister of Transport Barbara Castle brought in the 70mph blanket speed limit that is with us to this day. But several years later she said the 185mph Cobra affair did nothing to bring in the limit: it was being planned some time before. So, contrary to folklore, A98 can't be blamed for that.

"The week after the M1 business," says Jack. "I drove to Le Mans in my Cortina. Peter and I agreed that the object was to finish. At 355bhp our engine reportedly had 30bhp less than the Shelby cars, but we set a conservative target lap time, using a rev limit of just over 6000rpm."

Nevertheless, in practice A98 was timed at 181.4mph on the Mulsanne and, along with Dan Gurney's Shelby Cobra Daytona Coupe, was one of only two GTs to do a sub-four-minute lap. Jack continues: "I practised the Le Mans start endlessly – leave the car in gear, run across and

3
BPH 4B
A.C. CARS LTD
THAMES DITTON, ENGLAND.
CHASSIS No A 98
ENGINE No 1838
GOODYEAR

Clockwise: A98 is a classically graceful design; chassis number gives the car its name; rear quarters include extraction ducts to keep the cabin temperature down, which is crucial for hot, long-distance races; sturdy gearlever

scramble in, floor the clutch and twist the key. I did up the lap-strap on the GQ harness as I drove off, then at full tilt on the Mulsanne Straight I struggled into the shoulder straps. Right away I was trading the class lead with Dan's Daytona, running in sixth or seventh overall. Even keeping to our self-imposed limits, it was clear that our car was as quick as his. I did the first two hours, had a fuel stop, then did the next hour and a half. We were still running with Dan at the front of the class when I handed over to Peter just before 7:30pm."

But two laps later Bolton was in with fuel starvation. "At Le Mans in those days sabotage wasn't unknown," explains Jack. "One way to hobble a car without making it crash was to get to it when no one was watching and push a rolled-up newspaper through the fuel filler. After a while the paper disintegrated and clogged the fuel lines. Whether or not that was the reason, Peter made two stops to try to cure the problem. They changed the filters, took the fuel lines off, blew through them with an air line and eventually cleaned it all out. After that the car was going well again, but just before 10pm, on the fast section between Arnage and White House, the left-rear tyre blew."

A98 went sideways at around 150mph and rolled several times, coming to rest upside down some way off the circuit. Giancarlo Baghetti's 275P Ferrari was close behind and went off trying to avoid it. Bolton was only slightly injured and got himself out of the wreck, and Baghetti was unhurt. But under cover of darkness three French lads had clambered over the fences to get a buzz from the proximity of the passing cars, and they were hit by the Ferrari. All three died instantly.

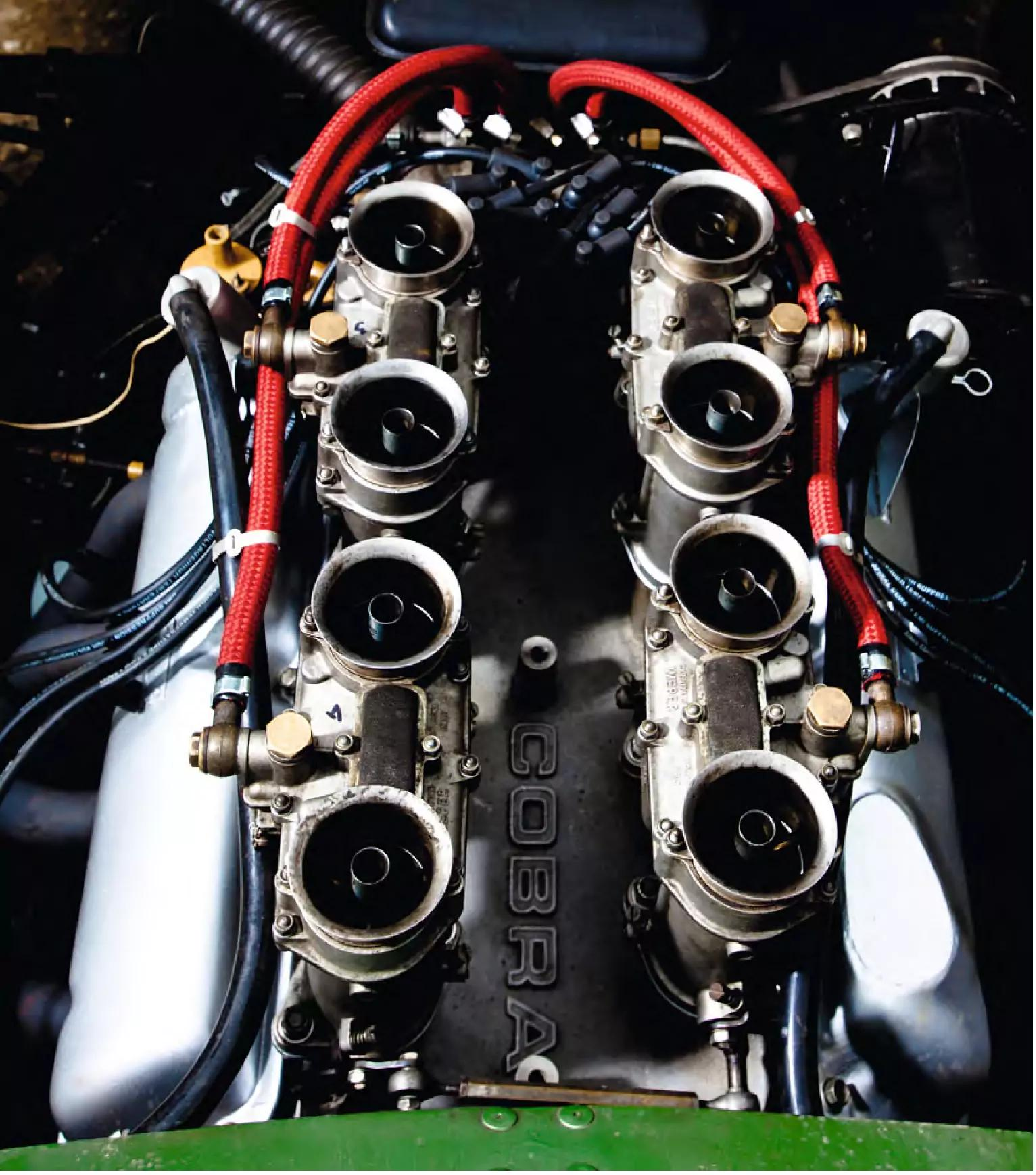
"I was asleep in AC's little caravan behind the pits," recalls Jack. "I was woken to be told the car was upside down in a field somewhere, and we were out of the race. I went back to the hotel and went to bed. The next morning I saw Peter in the hospital. He had facial cuts and a suspected broken rib, and they'd kept him in overnight. I watched a bit more of the race, then I got in the Cortina and drove home."

The Dan Gurney/Bob Bondurant Daytona had its own delays, with a leaking oil cooler and flagging oil pressure, but it struggled home in fourth to win the GT class. There are no 'ifs' in motor racing, but *if* A98 had kept to its conservative lap time without problems, it would have finished in fourth overall and GT winner. As it was, on Monday morning its sorry remains were shovelled back on to AC's truck and taken back to Thames Ditton. There the wreck was dismantled and the parts stored.

Which is where airline pilot and arch-AC nut Barrie Bird enters the story. In the 1960s Barrie was racing another ex-works AC Le Mans car, the 1959 Bristol-engined spaceframe prototype LM5000. Through owning this and other ACs, he was well known at Thames Ditton.

"In June 1964, I was shown A98 just before it left for Le Mans," Barrie explains, "and I was totally mesmerised. Back then, it looked like a spaceship. Its fate in the 24 Hours really demoralised everybody at the works, from Derek Hurlock down. It never occurred to me that it could be revived, until one day in 1972 I was nosing around the back of the factory. In a mass of weeds and brambles there was a pile of corrugated-iron sheets, with something hidden underneath. I pulled them back, and there, very wet, a bit battered but unmistakable, was the body buck made from Alan Turner's drawings. That was when I started to think that maybe A98 could live again."

> *'Jack sets off for a few brisk miles driving the car in which he'd battled Dan Gurney at 180mph-plus, all those years ago'*



Ford V8 in A98 was conservatively tuned for Le Mans to produce 355bhp – 30bhp less than Shelby's Daytonas

After much discussion, Derek Hurlock finally agreed to release all the remaining bits of the car that were hidden away. Once the buck had been dried out and repaired, Barrie asked Mo Gomm to make a second A98 shell. He continues: "Nothing was left of the old body except the rear spoiler, but a surprising amount of the rest had survived undamaged: chassis outriggers, wishbones, hubs, springs, dampers. Even the inlet manifold and Webers were there, still full of French mud. Plus the project had its own spares. They hadn't just gone to Le Mans with one windscreen – they had two more, still in their Triplex wooden box. And a spare fuel tank. There were lots of parts like that."

After 12 years' work, by Barrie, along with specialists such as marque authority David Sanderson, A98 ran again in 1984. Since then Barrie has raced the famous car a few times, and – because it is road-legal and registered with its original number – he has driven it more than once to Le Mans and back. But Jack Sears hadn't set eyes on A98 since 7:24pm on Saturday 20 June 1964, when he got out of it in the Le Mans pit to hand over to Peter Bolton.

Barrie needed no persuasion to trailer A98 from his Aberdeenshire home to Jack's Norfolk farm. It is an emotional moment when he sees the long, low, coupé once more, in its original light metallic green. He inserts himself into the tight cockpit, makes himself comfortable and turns the key to unleash the gulp of the V8's Webers and the unsilenced bellow of its exhaust. Then he sets off down the road for a few brisk miles driving the car in which he'd battled Dan Gurney in France at more than 180mph, all those years ago. He returns wreathed in smiles. Clearly A98's character has remained intact through its long slumber and painstaking return to noisy health.

If things had gone according to plan at Le Mans in 1964, A98 could have scored a great GT class victory behind the three works Ferrari prototypes. The batch of 12 customer racers would have been built, would surely have won races and might well have come to be regarded as Britain's Ferrari 250GTOs – shading the batch of 13 Lightweight E-types, or those six Shelby Daytona Coupes. There might even have been a sumptuous roadgoing version.

But it wasn't to be. Barrie Bird's application, persistence and determination have left him with one of the great 1960s racing GT cars, and one that's entirely unique. However, for the historians at least, A98 will remain just one more motor-racing might-have-been.

This story was first published in the September 2011 issue of C&SC. Jack Sears sadly passed away in August 2016, aged 86

COMPARING THE RACING COBRAS

Jack Sears is the only man to have campaigned the 4.7 Cobra in all four of its competition manifestations

THE ORIGINAL ROADSTER
"Pretty crude. The chassis flexed so much, it was like riding a bucking bronco. If you didn't keep your knees in and hang on, it would buck you off. The handling of the Ferrari 250GTO and the Lightweight Jaguar E-type – I raced both – knocked spots off it, but its acceleration out of corners was unbeatable."

STROL
Motor
RED
21

DAYTONA COUPE
"Much more rigid, put the power down better, more predictable. And the better shape made it faster in a straight line. But it was uncomfortable in a long race: very hot inside, and deafeningly noisy."

WILLMENT COUPÉ
"Shelby wouldn't sell John Willment a Daytona, so he had to make his own. It looked and felt almost the same, with a sharper nose and slightly lower roofline."

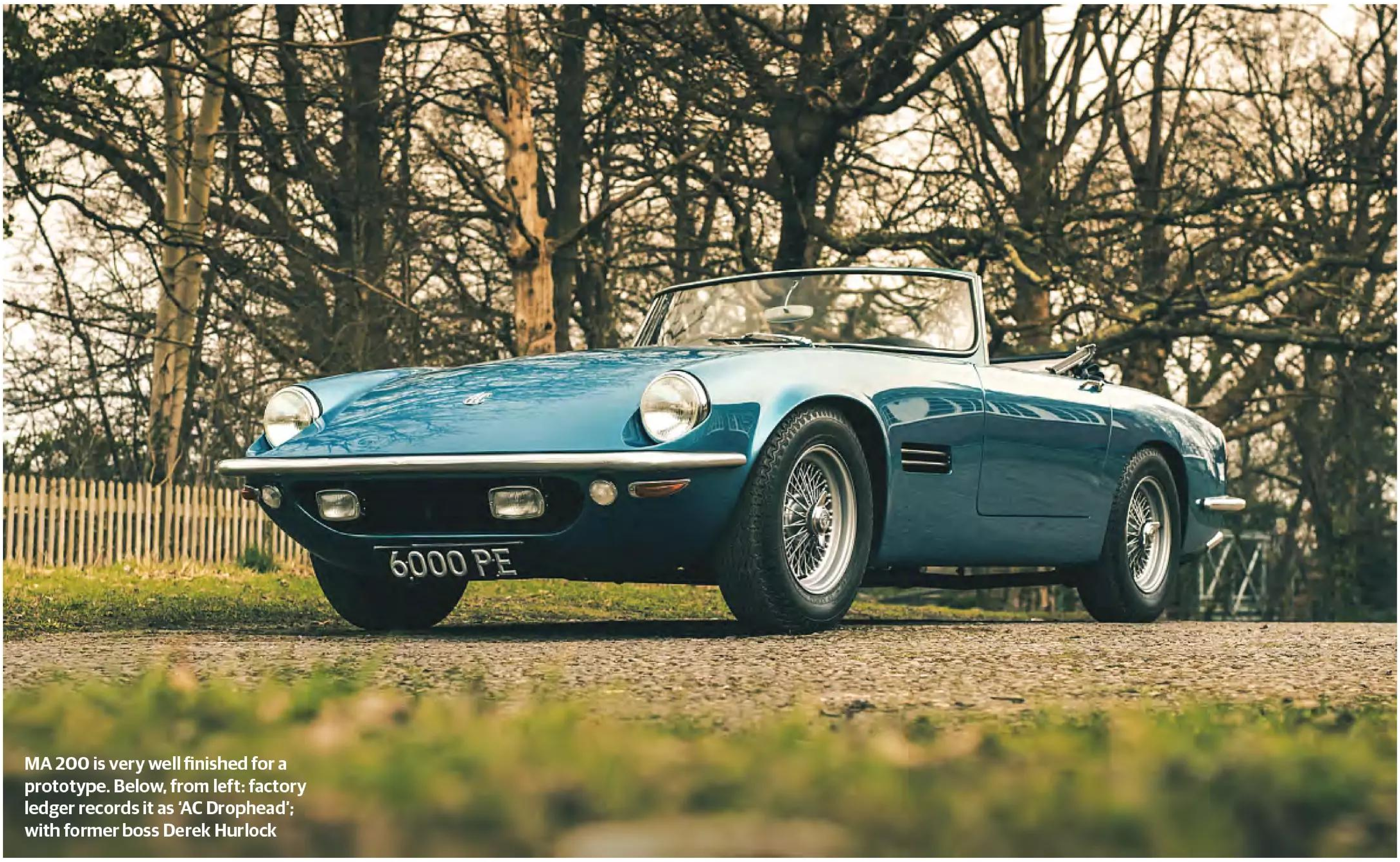
GETTY

A98
"Going by my brief Le Mans experience, potentially the best of the lot. It handled superbly, was very fast in a straight line and stable. But you can't argue with history."

Cobra's kissing cousin

AC's MA 200 signalled a bold departure for the Thames Ditton firm. Judging by this sole prototype, it could have been a contender

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **JACK HARRISON**



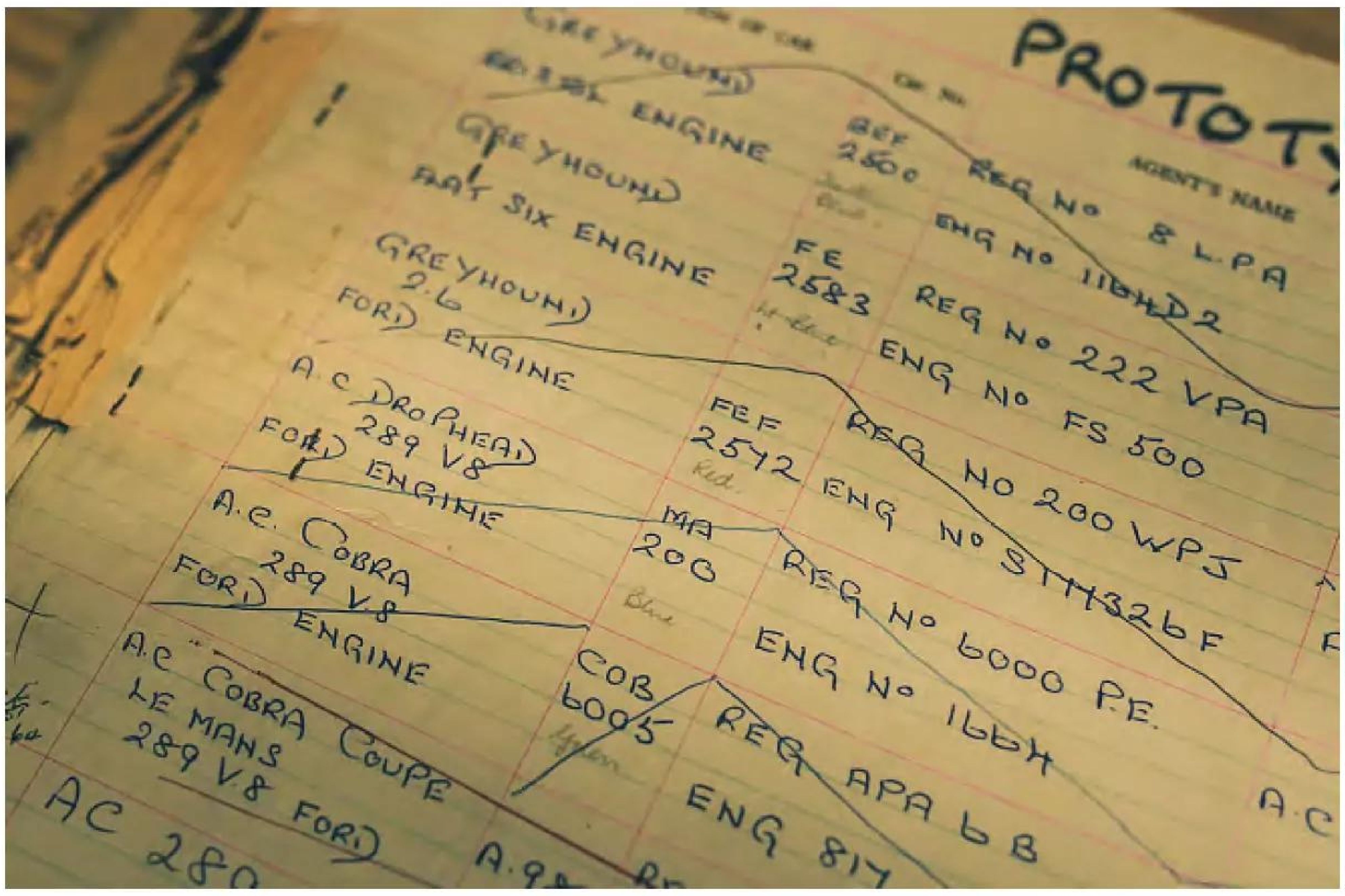
MA 200 is very well finished for a prototype. Below, from left: factory ledger records it as 'AC Drophead'; with former boss Derek Hurlock

There is no real mystery about AC's MA 200. This car was a completely rational response to the predicament in which AC Cars Ltd of Thames Ditton found itself as a small firm producing a successful – but ageing – range of handbuilt sports cars. The pretty Ace was nearly a decade old by the early 1960s, and was about to lose its most desirable engine option (the Bristol 2-litre straight-six) as it struggled to square up to the faster, more modern – and often cheaper – open two-seater opposition. At just £2000, the new E-type Jaguar was a car that might easily have finished off AC's business model.

The firm was arguably building too many variants on limited resources, with no way of knowing how long or successful its association with Carroll Shelby and the Cobra might be. While the pretty Aceca had proved that there was an appetite for a fixed-roof version of the Ace, the Greyhound's failure to capture the imaginations of 2+2 coupé buyers was a neat illustration of the disappointment that awaited specialist manufacturers when they tried to build cars with wider appeal. Although the Invacar, along with other general engineering projects, kept AC solvent, the Greyhound saga was a mistake the firm could ill afford.

MA 200 is an oddity among prototypes, in that it looks like a far more polished and sorted effort than many cars that did make the final cut. It was a serious project that generated some 250 factory drawings, but only resulted in a single working vehicle. Registered for road use on 19 November 1963, the blue two-seater, wearing the number 6000 PE, was AC boss Derek Hurlock's personal road car until 1968; he often used it to take his daughter to school. When *Road & Track* published a picture of the car parked in the paddock at Silverstone in 1964, this further fuelled rumours that AC had a 'new Cobra' waiting in the wings.

The design had curious origins in AC Cars' quest to build its own range of horizontally opposed engines. Between 1946 and 1964, a Polish former Bomber Command pilot called Zdzislaw Marczewski, inspired by Lycoming aircraft engines, worked for AC on a range of two-, four- and six-cylinder 'flat' power units, with both water- and air-cooled versions, and variously pushrod overhead-valve, inlet-over-exhaust and overhead-camshaft designs.



PROTOT
AGENT'S NAME

GREYHOUND ENGINE
BEF 2500
REG NO 8 L.P.A
ENG NO 11B4D2

GREYHOUND FLAT SIX ENGINE
FE 2583
REG NO 222 VPA
ENG NO FS 500

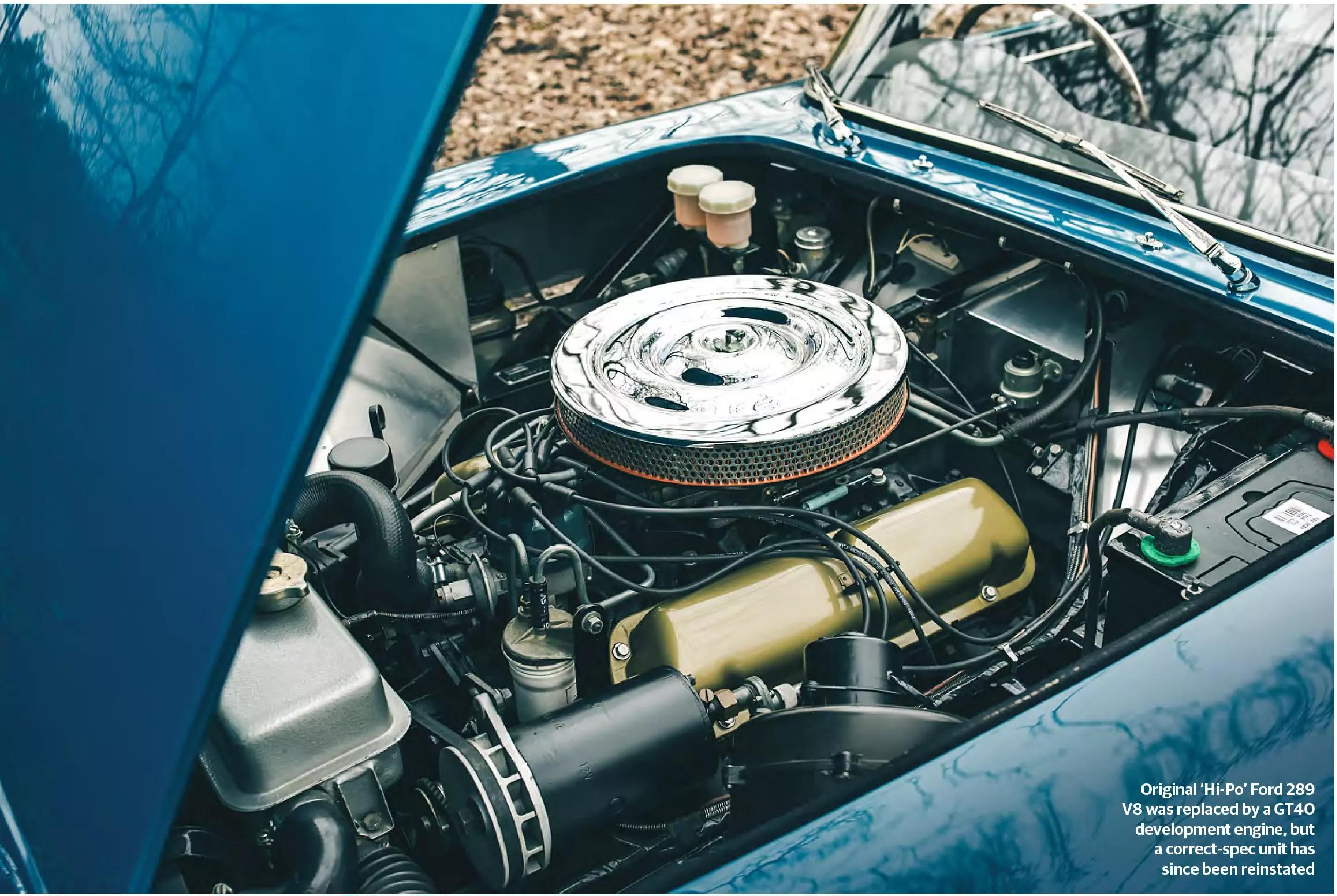
GREYHOUND 2.6 FORD ENGINE
FEF 2572
Red.
REG NO 200 WPJ
ENG NO ST1326F

A.C DROPHEAD 289 V8 FORD ENGINE
MA 200
Blue
REG NO 6000 P.E.
ENG NO 1664

A.C. COBRA 289 V8 FORD ENGINE
COB 6005
REG APA 6B
ENG 817

A.C "COBRA COUPE LE MANS 289 V8 FORD

AC 280



Original 'Hi-Po' Ford 289 V8 was replaced by a GT40 development engine, but a correct-spec unit has since been reinstated

A.C.CARS LTD
THAMES DITTON, ENGLAND.
CHASSIS No
ENGINE No

Tail hints at Aston DB4. Above, from left: high-mounted steering rack; production-level detailing; chassis plate reveals identity

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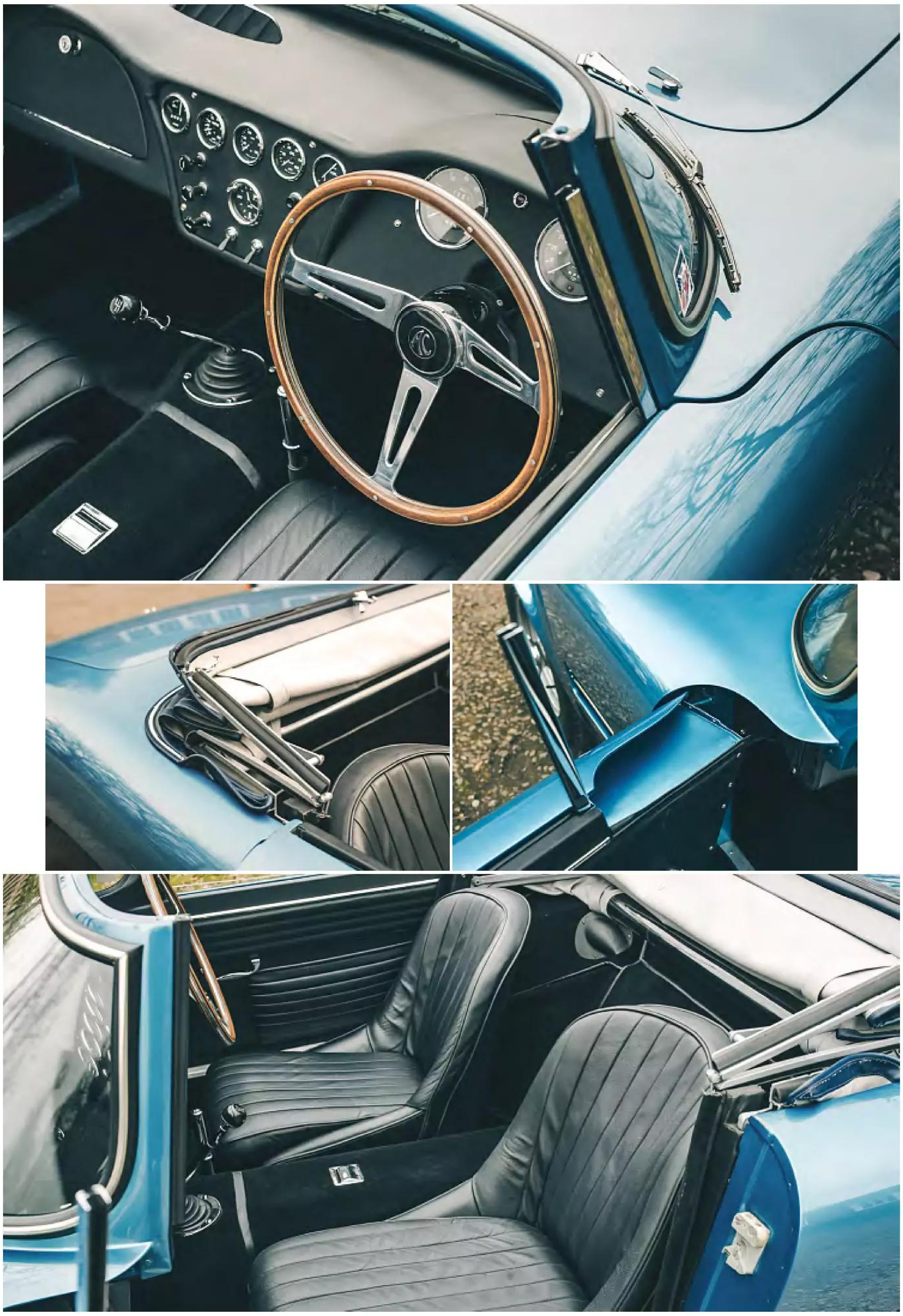


Clockwise from above: slim, Cobra-style seats, but the cabin is roomy; one-handed operation for hood; familiar wheel; handmade aluminium body

The smallest was a 500cc twin, the largest a 2.4-litre, all-aluminium, wet-liner 'six' good for 165bhp. A 2-litre flat-four was earmarked for a planned big AC saloon in the mid-1950s, but the 'six' was deemed a promising enough replacement for the firm's own ancient 2-litre, overhead-camshaft straight-six that parts for 100 examples were ordered up.

Meanwhile, Marczewski – who'd previously worked at the General Aircraft company of Feltham, and was described in some quarters as a former designer of MiG aircraft – spent most of his time developing the Invacar (an unfortunate contraction of 'invalid carriage') three-wheeler for AC's Ministry of Health contract. But while his MA 200 ('MA' reportedly came from the first two letters of his surname) was probably inspired by the flat-six project, there is some doubt as to whether any such engine was ever fitted to the car itself.

At one stage, AC Cars was in discussions with Jaguar about supplies of the Edward Turner-designed Daimler V8. But by the time the prototype was being built up in 1962, AC had access to the small-block 289cu in Ford motor, which came in a crate from Dearborn for £250 and made 100bhp more than the 2.4-litre flat-six, which had to be hand-assembled at a cost of £2000 and was, reportedly, neither very smooth nor particularly dependable.

Interviewed 30 years ago, the Polish engineer was adamant that at least one MA 200 coupé was built with his boxer unit, and that he was working on a design of a mid-engined version. Despite modern thin-wall casting techniques, Marczewski considered the Ford V8 a "lorry engine" that was nearly twice the weight of his beloved all-aluminium, horizontally opposed design. One flat-six was thought to have been tried experimentally in a Greyhound by AC's chief designer, Alan Turner, a personality who apparently clashed with Marczewski. As a face-saving exercise, Marczewski was permitted to design the front underpinnings of MA 200 in such a way that the flat-six could potentially have been accommodated.

'It looks handsome hood up or down, and there's a touch of the Aston Martin DB4/5 Convertible about the rear treatment'

Thus, underneath, MA 200 was much more than a rehash of Ace thinking. Out went the old twin-tube chassis and in came a square-section spaceframe construction with suspension that was unique to it: coil-sprung struts at the back, and wishbones at the front with curved, cantilevered upper members to work on inboard-mounted spring/damper units. The Jaguar-style Salisbury differential had inboard disc brakes, and needle-roller bearings were used on most of the pivot points as a further refinement. Charlie Gray of AC Heritage, which is currently looking after MA 200 ahead of its sale, feels that the car would have proved too complicated to make a profit, and that the gauge of the aluminium panels was on the thin side for long-term durability.

At 170in long, 68in wide and riding on a 96in wheelbase, MA 200 is quite a substantial car in the metal, and even before you enter the low, wide cockpit you can see that it is a much roomier sports car than the snug Ace. It looks handsome hood up or down (the top raises and lowers with one-handed operation, like an Alfa Spider, and sits well out of sight), and there is a touch of the Aston Martin DB4/5 Convertible about the rear treatment, with Ford Taunus Coupé tail-lights. If there is something cheeky about the pinch-waisted Ace, the rear view of MA 200 is almost dignified.

With its simple AC roundel badge and twin catches, the bootlid raises to give access to the fuel filler (something that would have been

AC MA 200

Sold/number built 1963/one
Construction steel spaceframe chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4736cc V8, single Autolite four-barrel carburettor
Max power 271bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 312lb ft @ 3400rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by upper links, lower wishbones, inboard coilovers **rear** lower wishbones, spring/damper struts; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, inboard at rear
Length 14ft 2in (4318mm)
Width 6ft 8in (1727mm) **Height** n/a
Wheelbase 8ft (2438mm)
Weight 2670lb (1211kg)
0-60mph n/a **Top speed** n/a
Mpg n/a **Price new** n/a

'The slim, specially made front bumper emphasises the car's width, like an early attempt at a Jensen-Healey'

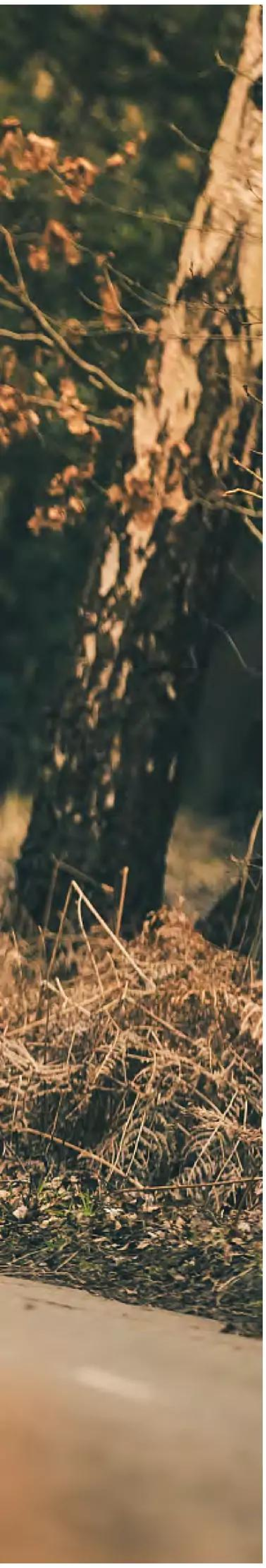
changed on production cars, presumably), with a luggage area that is mostly taken up by the spare wheel. A broad, front-hinged bonnet flows up to what I'm guessing is an E-type Jaguar 'screen. The slim, specially made front bumper emphasises the car's width, but leaves an impression of slight blandness in the front elevation, like an early attempt at a Jensen-Healey. The square foglights in the grille are from a Porsche 356 – and rare, apparently.

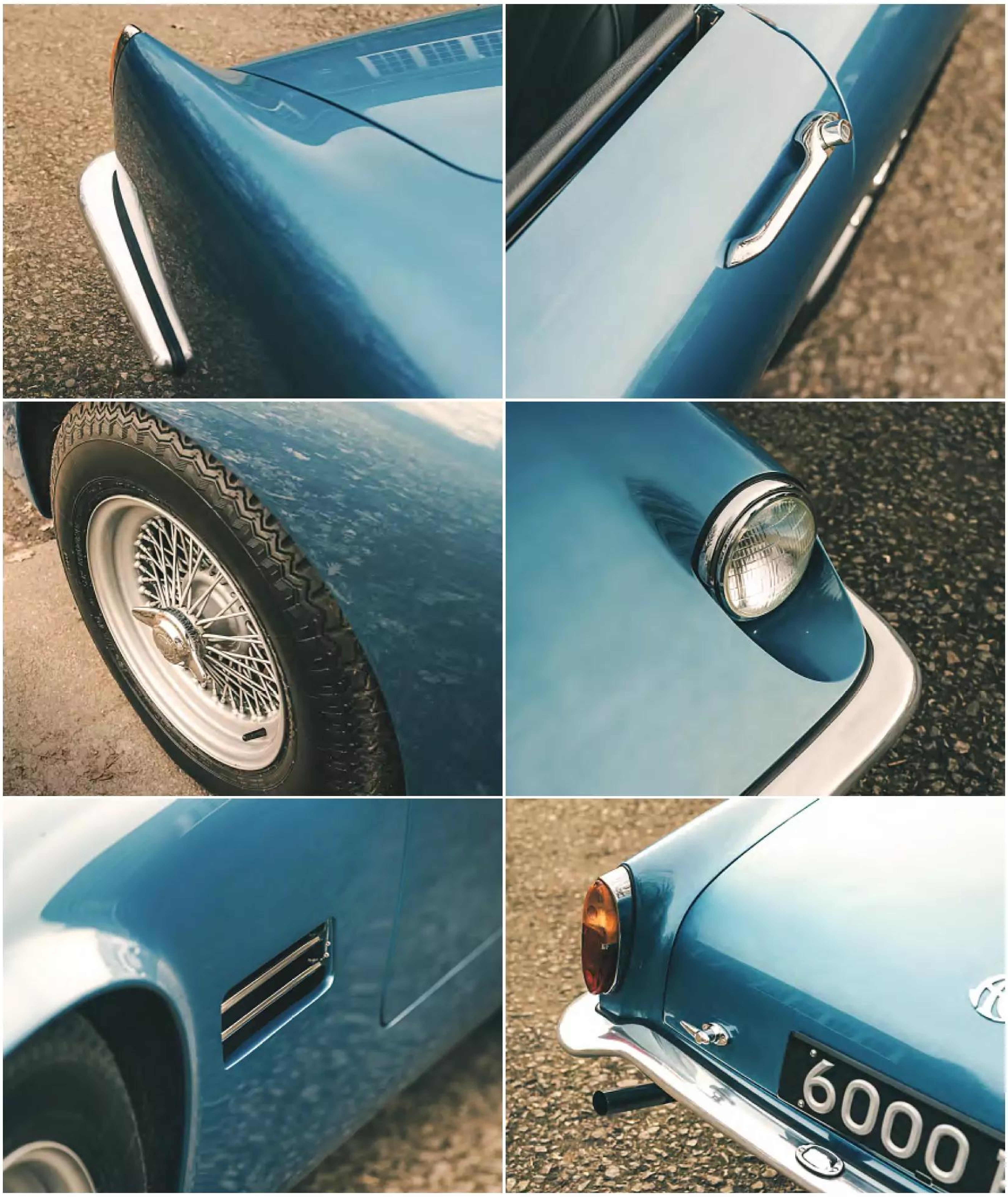
With its gold rocker covers and chromed pancake air filter, the all-iron 4736cc V8 is mounted well back in the bay, with vents in the wings to control underbonnet temperatures. There's an early E-type radiator and a dynamo, at a time when alternators were becoming a feature of most American engines. You can just spot the high-mounted rack-and-pinion steering under the coolant expansion tank.

The sills are deep, but the doors are long and the Cobra-like bucket seats hold you in place nicely, with plenty of leg and elbow room thanks to the wide central tunnel with its fly-off handbrake. There is something pleasingly vintage about the cast-aluminium, AC-branded clutch, brake and throttle pedals but, other than the slight remoteness of the gearlever in relation to the handsome Cobra MkII steering wheel, the driving position is well thought through. The unpretentious black-leathercloth dash, reminiscent of the 428's, forms twin nacelles that would have easily been adapted to right- or left-hand drive. There are six minor gauges in the centre, with a central 160mph speedo and 10,000rpm rev counter that are not easily obscured by the wood-rimmed wheel.

A touch of throttle and a flick of the tiny ignition key brings the 289 V8 to life instantly. The original engine was one of five 'Hi-Po' units presented to AC after Le Mans in 1963, but was replaced by a 302cu in GT40 development engine while MA 200 was in the hands of its second owner, Dr Roger Field of Kent. The car acquired a host of non-original parts during its life as a misunderstood secondhand sports car, later with Dr Peter Hague of Chichester.

During a forensic, 36-month restoration on behalf of its third owner, Florida attorney Mark Gold (from 2006), an original Hi-Po 289 was located with a block number that suggests it was cast the same day as the original. In 2010





Clockwise from top right: delicate doorhandles; headlamps look a touch too small; dainty Ford Taunus-sourced tail-lights; vents let out engine heat; painted wire wheels give a traditional look; crisp detailing

the rejuvenated AC won its class at the Amelia Island concours, returning to the UK in 2021.

MA 200 is easy to drive, and either thrilling or flexible according to your mood. The large gearlever movements suggest the shift might be sloppy, but it hits home beautifully every time, with smooth, positive bite from a middleweight clutch. This transmission, only used in a handful of 1962 Ford Fairlanes, is quiet and easily negotiated. There is an abundance of silky torque that makes the AC very driveable at low speeds and with no overheating issues. Such is the torque, gear ratios are almost irrelevant and at 2600lb this alloy-bodied two-seater is a relative lightweight for its size.

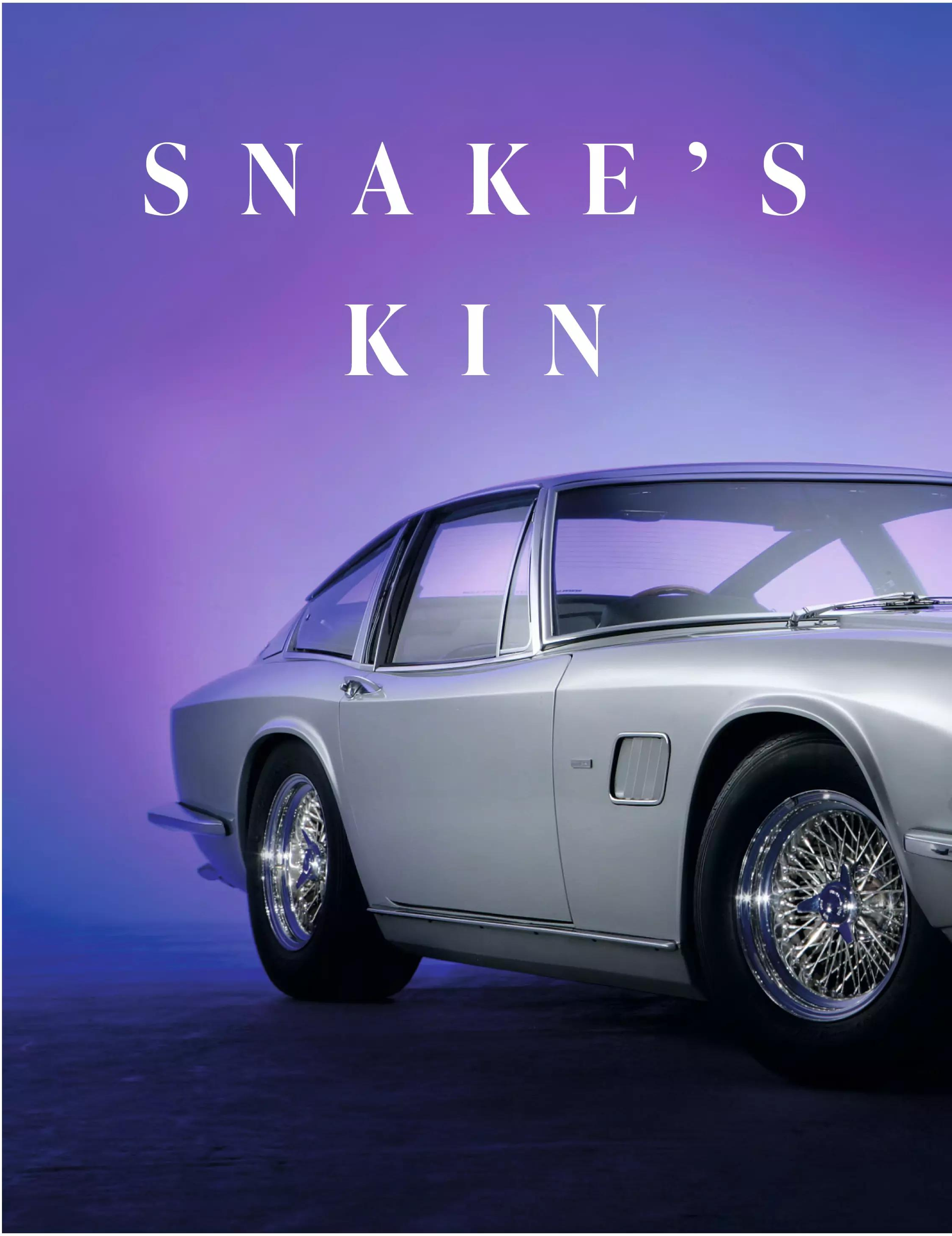
With the taps fully open, and despite a long first gear, the acceleration borders on the alarming, with a second cog that will take you into licence-losing territory should you indulge in the permitted 6000rpm, and an intoxicating third that levels hills and flings you at the horizon in a blur of pulsing harmonics from the twin tailpipes. Even in top, the rate of pick-up never seems to slow, yet you can delicately negotiate roundabouts in this ratio with equal aplomb, wafting from 10 to 110mph without opening the second set of chokes on the four-barrel carb or abusing the clutch.

The crashy front suspension is jarring on some surfaces, but MA 200 generates an abundance of cornering power in the dry, with a neutrality in its steering feel and a lack of roll that builds confidence quickly. There is no squat or dive and the brakes pull the car up strong, square and in short order. The steering is neither featherweight nor really hefty, and while the lock is not in the Triumph Herald/FX4 taxi class, you can manoeuvre the AC prototype without anxiety while feeling certain of what the front wheels are doing at all times.

Predating the contract to build 12 Cobras a week for Shelby, and much more than merely a missing link between the Cobra and the Pietro Frua-styled AC 428, MA 200 was an honest attempt to build a replacement for the Ace. This was a completely in-house production – intended to be more modern to look at, roomier and more comfortable – that could easily have taken AC into the 1970s.

Thanks to *AC Heritage (acheritage.com)*

SNAKE'S KIN



In an inspired move, AC stretched its Cobra chassis, dropped in a 7-litre V8 and clothed it with a sublime Frua body. So why didn't the 428 take the world by storm?

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **PETER SPINNEY/TONY BAKER**

This is one of the rarest ACs. Against about 1000 Cobras, just 80 428s were built – 51 coupés and 29 convertibles – before this fast and beautiful but never fully realised Euro-American GT succumbed to the legislative and economic forces of the early '70s. Not even a short-lived starring role in *The Avengers*, with the athletic figure of Linda Thorson behind the wheel, could raise the 428's profile in a world where expensive European cars with large American engines were becoming somewhat routine.

There was no other way forward, of course, when Derek Hurlock and his team at the tiny Thames Ditton factory began to conceive a successor to the MkIII Cobra. Although its brutal urge and muscular demeanour still had the power to enthral youths everywhere, sales were dropping off. There was a clear need to move forward with a more refined car that had a broader, more international appeal. With backing from Ford dropping away (as it changed its racing allegiance to the GT40), Hurlock saw the need to appeal to a new kind of customer, one to whom the privations of the raw and draughty Cobra were not acceptable.

Specifying a revised version of the coil-sprung MkIII Cobra's parallel-tube chassis with a 6in-longer wheelbase was relatively straightforward – as was the decision to use a 7-litre Ford V8 engine. In the prototype it was a 427 unit from the Cobra, but that was deemed too aggressive so the production cars would get the 428cu in Galaxie engine, with quiet hydraulic tappets and, usually, a Ford C6 automatic gearbox in beefed-up 'police' specification. The manual TopLoader 'box was available, but the clutch was heavy and most buyers took the view that the automatic was the better bet. With so much torque – some 462lb ft at 2800rpm – changing gears yourself seemed a superfluous activity.

So much for the underpinnings: the key to acceptance in the glamorous world of Euro GT cars was a sleek and contemporary style. This was to be the first Continental-bodied AC production model. At the Turin show in 1965, after meeting with the likes of Bertone and Ghia, Hurlock was introduced to Pietro Frua through Swiss AC distributor Hubert Patthey. Prolific and talented, Frua quickly produced some drawings. Hurlock approved them and sent out a chassis to Turin in May 1965.

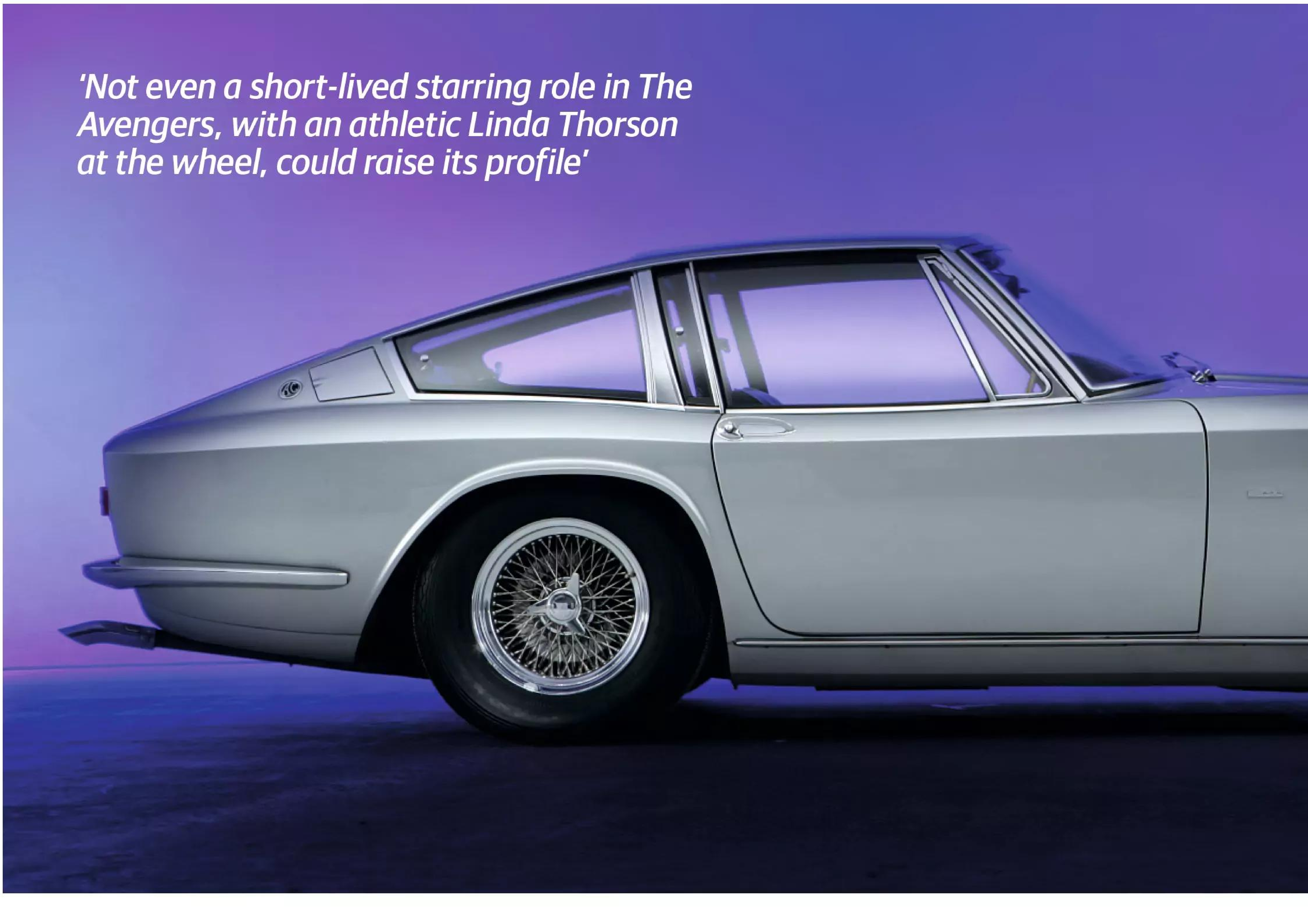
During the summer of that year, Frua fashioned a convertible on a wooden buck. It was so close in shape to his Maserati Mistral of the time that you'd have to do a double-take to tell the two cars apart – yet they only shared doorhandles and door-glass frames. The convertible made its debut at the Earls Court Motor Show in October 1965, still under the title AC 427, while the fastback coupé appeared the following year on the Frua stand at the Geneva Salon.

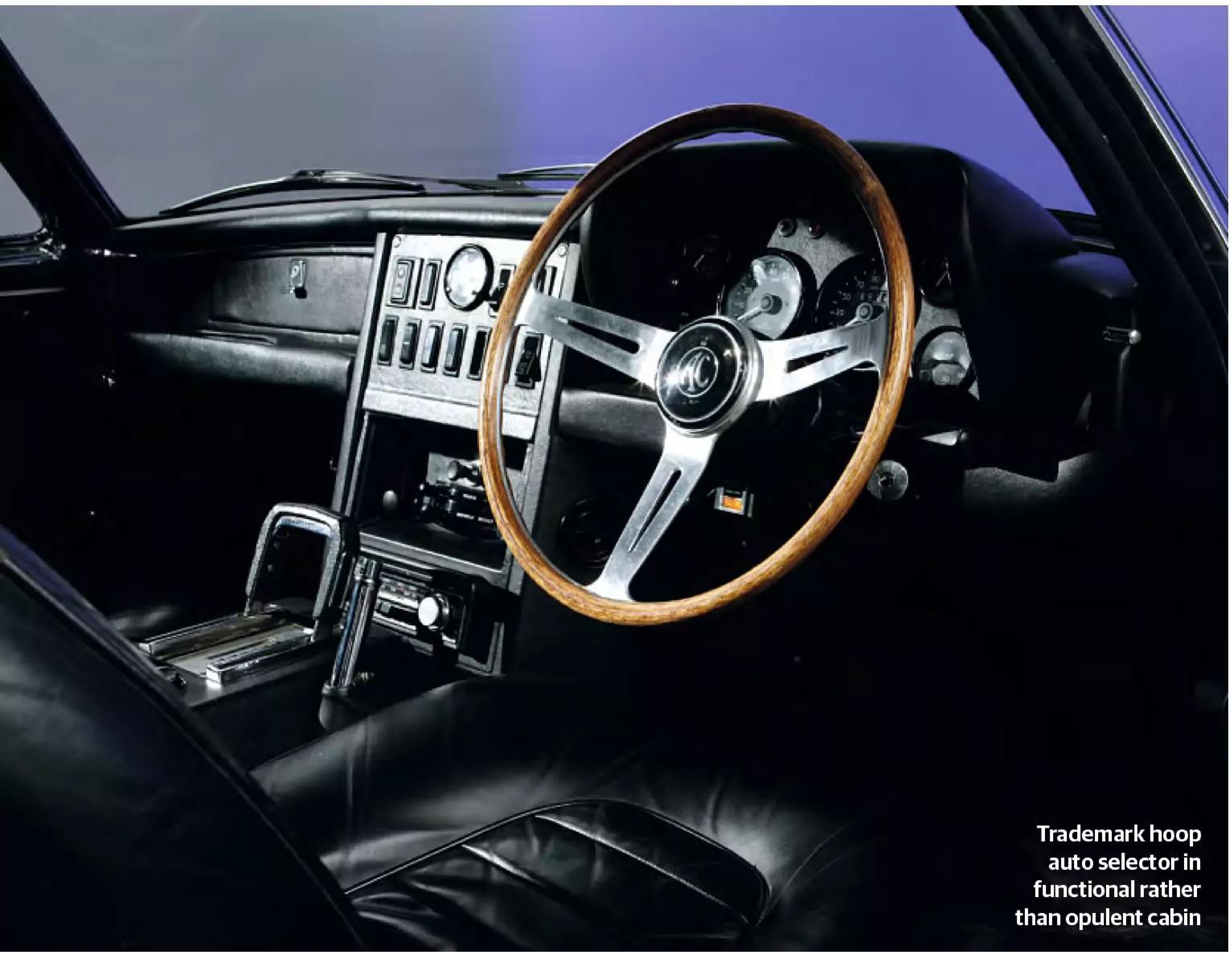
Although the first car, the one used in *The Avengers*, is thought to have had an alloy body, or at least some aluminium panels, this is unsubstantiated. LPH 800D did differ in having a steel cover for the easy-to-use hood, though.

Frua was commissioned to build the first 50 examples, sourcing the bodies from his subcontractor Maggiora. The Frua connection was both the answer to AC's immediate predicament and the beginning of a new set of problems. These hinged around the logistical nightmare of having to ship the chassis on slave wheels to Italy, then bring the partly completed cars back – six at a time on an open transporter – to Thames Ditton for trimming, wiring, painting and engine installation. Steel strikes in Italy in 1969 and '70 didn't exactly further the cause of the 428 either, and supply of the rot-prone, double-skinned bodies was always sporadic. Thames Ditton never managed to build more than two complete cars per week.

Talking to Giles Chapman in *C&SC* in April 1987, Hurlock recalled Frua as: 'A very nice man indeed… a very talented designer – he wasn't so good at getting cars into production, particularly for us, because we had limited amounts of money but still had to rely on him.'

'Not even a short-lived starring role in The Avengers, with an athletic Linda Thorson at the wheel, could raise its profile'





Trademark hoop auto selector in functional rather than opulent cabin

AC 428

Sold/number built 1967-'73/80 (51 coupés, 29 convertibles)
Construction tubular steel chassis, steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 7014cc (428cu in) 90° Ford V8, with single four-barrel Holley carburettor; 10.5:1 compression ratio
Max power 345bhp @ 4600rpm
Max torque 462lb ft @ 2800rpm
Transmission four-speed TopLoader manual or three-speed Ford C6 automatic, RWD via Salisbury Powr-Lok differential
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, Armstrong telescopic dampers; rear trailing arms
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes Girling discs, with twin servos
Length 14ft 8¼in (4477mm)
Width 5ft 8½in (1740mm)
Height 4ft 1½in (1257mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 11¾in (2432mm)
Weight 3214lb (1458kg)
0-60mph 5.4 secs
Top speed 145mph **Mpg** 14-20
Price new £5573 ('68)

Despite similarities with the Maserati Mistral, they only share doorhandles and door-glass frames. Below right: twin fuel-filler flaps for 18-gallon tank

Right: Rob Walker (on right) takes delivery of convertible. Below: 7-litre Ford Galaxie motor sits well back in chassis, giving good handling balance

One contemporary report hinted that AC might do a deal with Coventry Panels to build the bodies, but Hurlock never found a British firm to make the shells.

Low, well-inboard sills gave easy access to the 428's neatly finished but perhaps not luxurious cabin. Buyers in the £5600 class expected Jensen-style pampering, although you did get electric windows, excellent leather seats and, on the automatic, the dramatic hooped gear selector inherited from the blue-collar Galaxie. Early-'70s cars had a redesigned 'Federal' dashboard with a squared-off instrument binnacle and rather cheap-looking rocker switches. The 428 was a generous two-seater (with a padded rear bench in the fastback) and had a deep, square boot.

AC tried to address the serious heat-soak problems from the V8 with extra vents, but never really sussed it. With so much engine crammed into such a tight bay, overheating was another endemic 428 problem that, in the end, was left to subsequent owners to sort out. Rob Walker replaced his Facel II with a 428: he told me it would readily overheat, winter or summer. Incidentally, Keith Moon is believed to have owned fastback and drophead 428s.

An oil cooler was added when it was discovered that long periods of cruising at 120mph or more could cause the oil pressure to sag worryingly. Ground clearance – or the lack of it – was another shortcoming with which AC struggled throughout the life of the car, juggling spring and damper settings in an attempt to cure it. The 428 actually rode quite well, but tended towards bouncy under-damping.

Keith Judd, sales manager of AC, told Mike McCarthy in *C&SC* in November 1986: 'Because the car was heavier than the Cobra – particularly the fastback – we had to rework the suspension. Ideally we needed wider coils to the springs, but there simply wasn't room so we had to uprate the existing system. We spent a lot of time up at Armstrong's working on it.'

Yet, for all its foibles, the 428 made a fabulous touring car that wowed the press with its acceleration when, in 1968 and '69, they captured one to test. *Autocar* recorded 0-60mph in 6.2 secs, and John Bolster in *Autosport* set a blistering 5.4 secs (in an auto) and 145mph, a limit set by pumping up the hydraulic lifters.

Driven with restraint, the 428 was a gentle car – eight pistons the size of wastepaper baskets producing nothing louder than a muffled thrum, their modest exertions smoothed by the torque converter and silky efficiency of the auto 'box. Left to its own devices, the 428 would outrun all its opposition to more than 100mph and beat most of them over the standing quarter-mile while never appearing to exert itself, devouring straights on a lazy woofle of nonchalant torque.

The kickdown was hair-raising, with 50-70mph taking just 3.3 secs in second gear, the middle ratio in the superbly refined automatic gearbox that would take you to well past the ton. Not that there was much benefit in using the kickdown or manually holding on to gears, such was the 428's absurdly effortless demeanour.

'Normally, only part throttle is required to out-accelerate anything in sight as the car surges away into the middle distance with the silken surge of seemingly infinite torque,' enthused *Motor*, which compared the acceleration to that of a 'Titan moonshot' and reported that the press car stormed its 1-in-3 test hill so vigorously that it almost left the ground as it crested the top. All remarked on the car's relative thriftiness. Because it was high-geared and required so few revs to get along quickly, the 428 could manage 17mpg – maybe even 20 – driven half-moderately.

With the engine mounted well back, giving a slight rearward weight bias (53%), these cars, shod with fat 205x15 Dunlop radials on centre-lock wire wheels, could really put their power down. They cornered flat and neutral on their double wishbones, steered heavy but true with unassisted rack-and-pinion steering – which tended to kick back strongly – and pulled up square and strong on generous, dual-servo-assisted disc brakes all round.

‘Left to its own devices, the AC would outrun its opposition to 100mph-plus, devouring straights on a lazy woofle of torque’

Most cars had centre-lock wires from new. Despite large side vents, 428s were noted for overheating

Hurst Park Automobiles has since sold the restored, 50,000-mile 428 shown here, but it also had a near-identical car with similar mileage in stock. The firm has sold several 428s over the years. “They were rusty when they were built,” says Kevin Wooding, “and, like an Alvis, they are either worth a load of money or nothing.” The survival rate is good considering the rot, although a few 428s have been chopped into Cobras. “They are always under threat of it, with prices of 7-litre Cobras being what they are,” adds Kevin disapprovingly. “Also, you get an AC chassis number, running gear and an engine you can use.”

Relatively few 428s today are in really nice condition, yet the good ones have gone up in price. Kevin adds: “People are a bit unsure of values, but a good coupé will make proper money now, and a convertible even more.”

A late arrival to the glamorous world of grand tourers, the AC 428 never really got the chance to establish itself. On the small site at Thames Ditton, Mr Hurlock and his overstretched team found it nigh-on impossible to reconcile a busy trade in invalid carriages for the Ministry of Health with the development of a suave, 7-litre GT. A convertible with retractable lights and a new four-seater coupé called the 429 were attempts to update the idea, but it was too late. The Fuel Crisis, and crash-testing requirements with which a tiny firm such as AC could not afford to get involved, dealt the unlucky 428 the final blows. Production ended in 1973.

It was premature but hardly unexpected. Even if Frua had been able to reach critical mass in terms of bodyshell output, it appears unlikely that the 428 would have been a quick seller. It was, if nothing else, oddly pitched: neither hardcore enough for Cobra owners to buy into, nor plush enough to really appeal to the Jensen crowd. It was also, because of the convoluted production process, far too expensive for a US-engined exotic – at a grand more than even a DB6 or an Interceptor in ’68. The machinations of its patchy evolution feed the perception that such hybrid cars were really just pricey, factory-sanctioned hot rods. Thus the AC 428’s greatest strength – cheap, reliable and effortlessly refined American-sourced power – was at the same time its greatest psychological weakness in the eyes of most of the people who could afford one.

But if, like me, you are relatively immune to the charms of earlier ACs of the romantic era, the 428 has a powerful draw. It has almost everything going for it: an uneasy international marriage of the svelte and brutal, a wild union of raw urge and elegantly tailored urbanity that makes it one of the most intriguing cars of the Euro-American idiom.

__Thanks to__ Hurst Park Automobiles (hurstpark.co.uk)

The Hurlocks & the three bears

The Cobra is best remembered as the leaf-sprung 289 and musclebound 427. But when AC's Hurlock brothers married the latter's coil-sprung chassis with the former's sublime V8, its third and final incarnation was just right

WORDS **GREG MACLEMAN** PHOTOGRAPHY **WILL WILLIAMS**

PPD 567E

AC 289 SPORTS

Sold/number built 1967-'69/27
Construction twin-tube cross-braced steel chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4727cc V8, four-barrel carburettor
Max power 271bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 312lb ft @ 3400rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD via Salisbury limited-slip differential
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers; rear trailing arms
Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** discs
Length 13ft 3¾in (4057mm)
Width 5ft 5in (1651mm)
Height 4ft ¾in (1238mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2094lb (950kg)
0-60mph 5.6 secs
Top speed 135mph **Mpg** 17
Price new £2951 11s

Hugely wide rear end is a legacy of chassis COB6116's 1970s upgrade to 427 spec by Autokraft founder Brian Angliss

Not since fish met chips – or perhaps, if you're of a North American disposition, since peanut butter met jelly – has there been a more happy union than that of Ford's compact and powerful small-block V8 and the lithe, agile and pretty AC Ace. Born of expediency and ambition, what was created in 1962 proved to be far greater than the sum of its parts: a machine that turned the world of production sports cars and endurance racing on its axis, giving rise to a legend that has endured for more than half a century. But of all the variants to emerge from the alliance between the British Thames Ditton factory and Texan team boss Carroll Shelby, it's the last of the line that provides the most intrigue: the AC 289 Sports.

Marriages of convenience rarely last, but that's what the Cobra project became. For AC owners William and Charles Hurlock, it was a way of infusing the outdated flagship with a new cachet while at the same time solving an engine problem that had shadowed the model throughout its production life: from aged AC to proprietary Bristol and Zephyr 'sixes', the performance potential of the older design always fell slightly short of that of the chassis. For Ford, the Ace was a shortcut – a ready-made sports car that could take the firm to the top of the podium faster and more affordably than anything else. And for Shelby, the driving force behind the project, it became a way of realising a lifelong dream.

The very first Cobra prototypes varied little from the Ace, save modifications to make the engine fit and reinforcements to the chassis to cope with the extra power of the 260cu in V8. Not long after the first car arrived in the States from Surrey, the pioneer destined for the track touched down in Los Angeles, heading straight to Dean Moon's shop in Santa Fe Springs, which then housed Shelby. From its debut race at Riverside in October 1962, the Cobra proved its mettle. And though wins didn't come straight away, a series of impressive showings – usually curtailed by mechanical failure – demonstrated not only the model's performance but also, crucially, its ability to beat the new Corvette.

With track success came rapid development. Inboard rear disc brakes were quickly ditched, and by the time just 75 of the initial 100-car order had been fulfilled, the switch was made from 260cu in V8 to the uprated Hi-Po 289cu in small-block. By chassis CSX2126, rack-and-pinion steering had replaced the Ace's vague steering box for the MkII, while by CSX2160 side vents in the front wings had been added along with lightly flared wheelarches to accommodate wider 6in wheels.

The biggest change to affect the Cobra line-up came in 1965 with the arrival of the MkIII, which featured a completely redesigned chassis and a big-block 427cu in V8. The idea had been trialled as early as 1963, when Ken Miles shoehorned Ford's 7-litre engine into the chassis of a standard Cobra, fresh off the boat from Blighty. Fitted with uprated brakes and dampers, and sporting peg-drive alloy wheels – and by then a 390cu in V8 – the car was put to work at Sebring in 1964. It was an abomination, an unruly pig of a thing that could barely stay on track. Miles stuck it into a tree in practice, and after it was patched up the race wasn't much better. Fuel starvation

Correct Hi-Po 289cu in Ford small-block V8 has been sourced in the mission to revert the AC to factory spec

AC HERITAGE

1957 AC Aceca Bristol 'TDF'

An illustrious race and rally career, ex-Tour de France, Monte Carlo, Tulip Rally, Pau 3-Hour GT – piloted by ten-time Le Mans driver Peter Bolton. Single ownership since 1967. Offered as a fully restored, matching-numbers motorcar through our AC Heritage Works. Eligible for Mille Miglia, Tour Auto, Goodwood, and many more. **POA**

1969 AC 428 Frua Fastback

This is one of only 51 coupes ever produced. 7-litre Ford V8 engine with a automatic gearbox. Left-hand drive, with three previous owners. Currently registered in the EU. Meticulously maintained. **£149,995**

1990 AC Cobra MKIV Lightweight

12,000 miles from new. Three previous owners. One of very few MKIV lightweights with the correct 'AKL' chassis number. 'A26 COB' is included in sale and relates to the 26 promoted lightweights. **£165,000**

1963 AC MA-200 Prototype

Unique factory prototype, used daily by AC's managing director between 1963-68. It has a 289 Ford V8, fully independent AC design. Fully restored. Significant history file, with magazine features and factory drawings. **POA**

1955 AC Aceca

An early production model. Eligible for the Mille Miglia. Recently, it underwent a full interior re-trim and a mechanical overhaul, totalling £30k. A charming example of the Aceca that's hard to replicate. **£85,000**

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AC Heritage · International Broker of Historic & Classic Motorcars · Brooklands Motor Circuit, Surrey, UK

Telephone +44(0)1932 828545 · Mobile +44(0)7557 878123 · www.acheritage.com and leaking hydraulics marred a frustrating debut, and the car finally gave in by expelling a conrod on to the track in protest.

The experiment showed up a chassis that had its roots in the early '50s, and although Shelby wasn't exactly fired up by the prospect of the big-banger, he realised that a stronger, more advanced chassis was a necessity. Ford was more enthusiastic, keen to extend the Cobra's competition life with the 289 by then being comprehensively outgunned.

Thus the new frame was a collaborative effort, with Ford's computer – plus a little help from suspension guru Klaus Arning – contributing the geometry to AC, where in-house engineer Alan Turner transformed the ambitious printouts into a more grounded reality. The result bore a familial resemblance to the outgoing chassis, in that it still featured two longitudinal tubes, although these were beefed up to 4in diameter and set further apart. Uprights rose at each corner – single at the front and double at the rear – and were braced at either end. At the front, in place of the old transverse semi-elliptic leaf springs, the suspension comprised unequal-length wishbones with 4½in coil springs allied to Armstrong telescopic dampers, while the rear incorporated trailing arms and springs with two fewer coils.

Despite a monumental effort to meet homologation rules for the 1965 season, the requisite number wasn't hit and just 56 of the intended 100 cars were built – some detuned and sold to the public as fire-breathing road cars. The 'production' 427 didn't fare much better in showrooms, however, and by 1967 Shelby had wound down imports.

There the story might have ended but for AC, which decided to continue production for a further two years. Not only would the car be badged as an AC – cocking a snook at Shelby, who had removed the crests from the earlier cars as soon as they arrived Stateside – but it would also combine the best componentry from across the range, mating the big-block's coil-sprung chassis with the 289cu in Hi-Po engine only offered up to that point in the earlier leaf-sprung cars.

Chassis COB6116 is one of these special machines, just 27 of which left the Thames Ditton works between 1967 and late '69. (Cars for export wore 'CSX' chassis numbers, while UK cars featured 'COB' numbers.) Originally finished in Pacific Green over black, it rolled off the line at the end of January '67 and headed to Hersham and Walton Motors in Surrey, from where it was purchased by David Skailes – with a Marcos 1800 taken in part-exchange – before being delivered by none other than HWM co-founder George Abecassis. Though Skailes was no stranger to the track, the 289 Sports was used predominantly as a road car – a testament to the usability of the package – before being sold on.

The lure of great power is always a draw, and in the 1970s the car found its way to the workshops of Brian Angliss, who was commissioned to transform the 289 into the fire-breathing big-banger for which the chassis was originally intended. A side-oiler 427 was fitted – not the softer, cheaper 428 that found its way into some factory cars – while the delicate bodywork was modified to match the engine, with wider, more aggressive wheelarches. Things changed again when the car was later sold to a buyer in Japan, and the big-block V8 was replaced by a 302 while the body was refinished in metallic blue.

By 2015 the AC had found a home with its current owner, whose passion for originality resulted in a comprehensive overhaul of the mechanical components that included a return to the original-type Hi-Po 289. The slightly

'Prime the fuel pump, turn the key and the twin pipes report with the same angry burble first heard in Surrey in 1967'

This car wears alloys, but most 289s had wires, which Shelby gave up on after starting his wheel business. Top: handsome wheel fronts 427-style dash

LIFE CYCLE OF THE SNAKE

Throughout its career, the Cobra became more American than apple pie, a Kodachrome vision of bright colours, blue skies and white-T-shirted mechanics, as much ingrained in the history of LA and southern California as any other classic. But we can't forget the story began with John Tojeiro's sports car back in 1953. And while its tale is inextricably linked with Shelby and the Blue Oval, there's a cheerful symmetry – at least to us Brits – of the car finally coming home and once again wearing AC badges. The best Cobra might not be a Cobra at all…

'62

AC 3.6 ACE Ford's new 221cu in V8 is married to the Ace chassis for the first time, creating the 3.6 Ace

AC ACE COBRA The small-block V8 is quickly uprated to 260cu in, and by mid-February 1962, when the first chassis is sent to the States, the car has gained its 'Cobra' moniker

AC COBRA 289/SHELBY COBRA 289 After 75 cars have been built, the 260 engine is replaced by Ford's revised 289cu in unit in High Performance trim producing 271bhp

'63

LE MANS Shelby takes on Le Mans with two Cobras, both with fastback aluminium hardtops, bottom-hinged bootlids, side vents and bonnet scoops. Two batches of replicas follow in June

DRAGON SNAKE The Cobra is honed for the quarter-mile: the $8000 Dragon Snake pack (right) readies the car for the strip, with hotted-up engine, Koni dampers, Goodyear slicks, heavy-duty driveshafts and a 4.54:1 rear end; eight are made. The next year two 'Slalom Snakes' are built for autocross events

'64

SHELBY DAYTONA COUPE Shelby creates six coupes on modified 289 chassis (left). They take the 1965 FIA International Championship for GT Manufacturers

FIA ROADSTER Shelby commissions a series of competition roadsters with bigger front arches and rear wings, cutaway doors and a steeply raked windscreen

AC A98 Buoyed by Le Mans in '63, AC works on its own coupé, styled by Alan Turner and bodied by Maurice Gomm

'65

SHELBY 427 COMPETITION Revised coil-sprung chassis with 7-litre 'side-oiler' big-block V8. The homologation target isn't met and the model misses out on the 1965 season

SHELBY 427 S/C Competition cars are converted for road use. 'Semi-Competition' cars have iron heads and bronze suspension bushes swapped for rubber. Just 31 examples are made

SHELBY 427 Production 427s at first use the last homologation shells, but poor sales herald the Cobra's American demise

'66

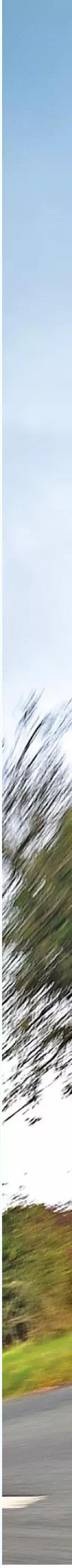
SUPER SNAKE The Cobra to end all Cobras is built. A Competition car is fitted with twin Paxton superchargers and an automatic gearbox before being used personally by Carroll Shelby. A second car is then created, which meets its end after being driven off a cliff and into the Pacific Ocean

'67

AC 289 SPORTS Carroll Shelby might have (temporarily) given up on the Cobra in favour of the Mustang, but AC Cars gives it one last roll of the dice. The coil-sprung chassis is allied to a J-type 289 V8 to create a supremely capable all-rounder; 27 are built, including the Tara Browne car painted in psychedelic colours by pop-art collective Binder, Edwards and Vaughan, plus the Billy Walker/Aidan Mills-Thomas racer

'68

THE END OF THE LINE The final AC 289 Sports leaves the assembly line at the Thames Ditton factory on 15 July 1968, drawing to a close 'Cobra' production in Europe



more muscular bodywork that was formed around the original bonnet, bootlid and doors was retained, as was the colour, but in every important respect COB6116 is now back as the factory intended. And how it sounded. Check the isolator, let the fuel pump prime the carb and turn the key, and the twin pipes report with the same angry burble that was first heard as the car left its Surrey birthplace in 1967.

There's a power trade-off associated with the return to the correctly dated engine, although the figures are still impressive enough in a car that weighs so little: 271bhp at 6000rpm, along with 312lb ft at a little over half that. The Hi-Po 289 has plenty of muscle, but the AC isn't the lazy animal you might imagine: it's a great bear of a thing that comes to life when the throttle pedal is stabbed. This is no lolloping *boulevardier* but a shivering mass of muscle and sinew whose vocal range spans from rolling thunder to a screaming song.

Of course, it's possible to stick the AC in top and rumble along at anything over 25mph, but you'll rarely find yourself doing it. The ratios are so well-judged and the acceleration so thrilling that the seemingly unburstable V8 rarely drops below 3500rpm on cross-country drives. Keep the revs up and the power delivery is instant; the casual jogger becomes the Olympic hopeful, and you'll swear you catch glimpses of Miles, Dan Gurney or Bob Bondurant in the mirror, if only for a moment.

Push the AC hard and you're soon reminded that you are not, in fact, an endurance-racing legend. While the talented and brave reported in period tests the ability to 'use more throttle to keep the tail in check', a hair-raising twitch is enough to make lesser mortals ease off.

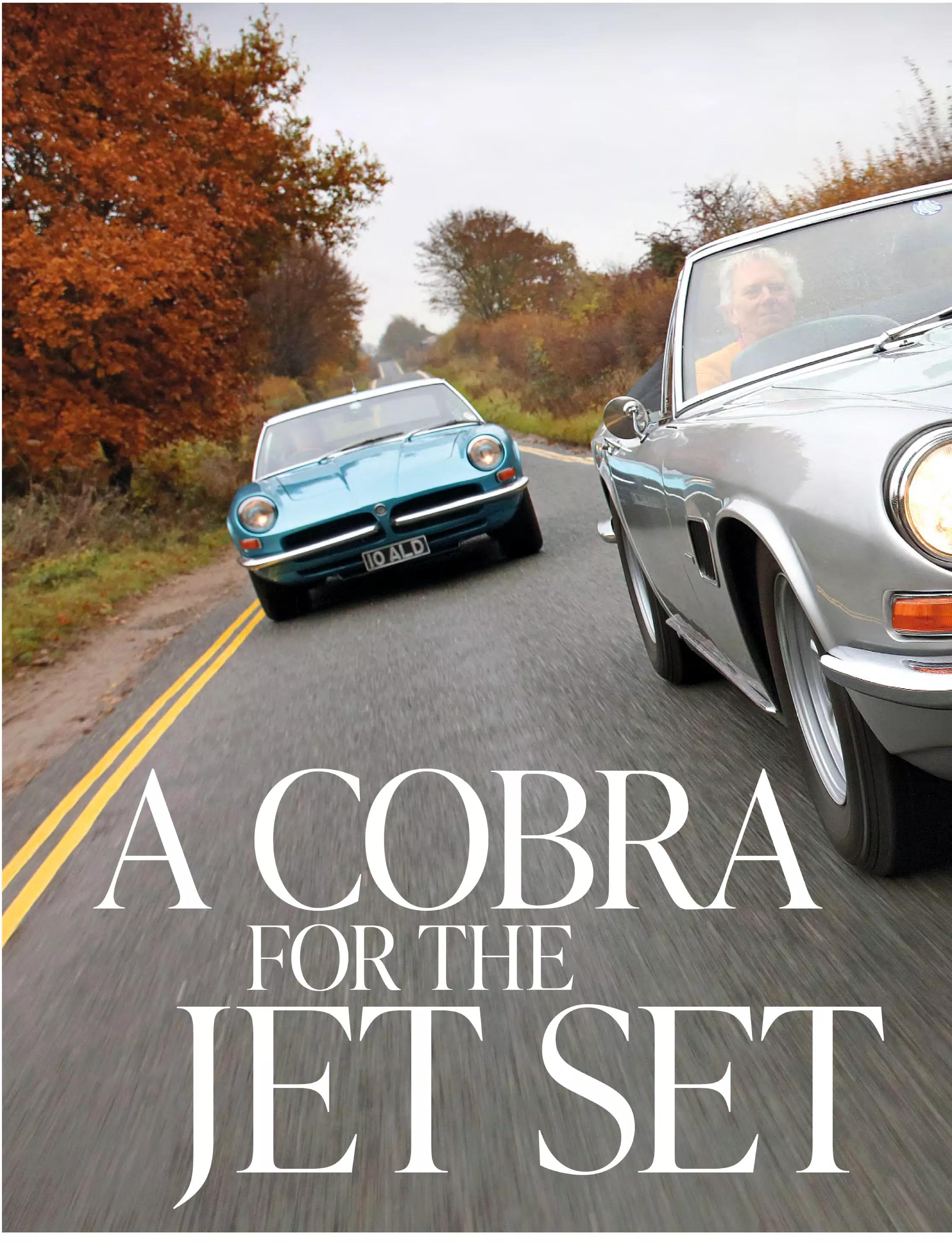
Early Cobra sales brochures described such comforts as 'a full instrument panel', and as you contort your left leg awkwardly past the enormous transmission tunnel and on to the clutch pedal for another change, the irony is not lost. In this car you work around the machine in many ways and in harmony in others: the short-throw, direct change of the Borg-Warner T-10 gearbox is a delight, while the steering, of the revised rack-and-pinion type, feels perfectly weighted when matched with the lighter small-block motor.

The leaf-sprung Shelby Cobra was always an effective yet slightly crude device in comparison with European sports cars – like using a hammer to drive a screw. This, though, is a more considered machine, as bouncy and choppy as befits a roadster born in the mid-'60s, but at the same time boasting a compliance that blunts the worst characteristics of the earlier Cobra while accentuating the best.

The 289 Sports lacks the outright power of the fearsome 427, but it is lighter, better balanced and more wieldy: you don't need bulging forearms either to pull it into line or haul it back from the brink. Period reports cast some doubt on whether it could be used as a 20,000-miles-a-year everyday car, but simply asking the question highlights the sheer usability of this last-of-the-line small-block wonder. The more time you spend with it, the better it gets.

Thanks to *Classic Motor Hub (classicmotorhub.co.uk)*

'As the revs rise, the casual jogger becomes the Olympic hopeful, and you'll swear you glimpse Miles, Gurney or Bondurant in the mirror'



A COBRA FOR THE JET SET

AC's rare 428 blended savage power with beautiful Italian styling, and it was created in both Fastback and Convertible forms. Prepare to fall in love…

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**

'The 428's message was one of unfettered performance, with civilisation as a bonus'

The trend towards Euro-American hybrids had almost peaked by the time AC got its act together with the 428 in the late 1960s. The moment had passed: Jensen appeared to have cornered the market, with Bristol and others mopping up the leftovers. Gordon-Keeble, meanwhile, had shown what happens to a car priced too timidly to attract buyers who equate high prices with excellence. Perhaps uniquely, the GK flunked because it was too cheap.

The AC 428, never a cheap car, turned out to be rarer than the Gordon-Keeble. In many ways it was not the glossy international GT hot rod that its mongrel CV implied. More than just a pretty face – and an off-the-shelf, reliable, lusty engine – the 428 concept had built-in credibility because it was a direct extrapolation of the most famous American-engined European sports car of all: the competition-proven, coil-sprung, big-block Cobra.

Being 6in longer in wheelbase than its forebear, it was an attempt to make a grand tourer out of perhaps the world's most uncompromisingly aggressive roadster, rather than to re-engineer ponderous saloon components into a businessman's express with sporting aspirations. It would come with the automatic gearbox and electric windows expected by the carriage-trade customers at which it was aimed, yet somehow the AC 428 never pandered entirely to the luxury whims that complicated and compromised the GTs of the late 1960s and early '70s, against which contemporary voices struggled to compare it.

With a price-tag that was as ferocious as its acceleration, the 428's message was one of unfettered performance with civilisation as a bonus, instead of the other way around.

Always a two-seater rather than a half-baked 2+2 – why compromise luggage space with semi-useless back seats that would hardly ever get used? – the 428 weighed in at almost 500lb less than a Jensen Interceptor or an Aston Martin DBS. That was the secret to not only its performance – 0-60mph in 6 secs or less, 30-50mph in 5.5 secs – but also its quite reasonable 17mpg fuel consumption, at least for those who resisted the temptation to open the second set of chokes on its four-barrel Holley carb. I happen to think that it is the most desirable car AC ever built. It certainly deserved to find more than 81 buyers – 51 Fastbacks and 30 Convertibles – over its traumatic seven-year production run.

AC Cars Ltd of Thames Ditton was, of course, a long-established marque rather than a short-lived invention of the 1960s. The company may have earned its daily bread out of building three-wheeled plastic invalid cars for the Ministry of Health, but it also had a 65-year history and a pedigree of producing high-quality, race-winning sports cars. You can find the 428's origins in a number of places, but it appears that AC managing director Derek Hurlock was thinking about producing a more refined version of the 289 long before the contract to build cars for Carroll Shelby looked as if it was going to come to an end. Keen to avoid another debacle on the scale of the Greyhound, Hurlock understood that Italian styling was the way to go in the mid-'60s.

As early as 1964 there were reports of a new AC being spotted in the paddock at Le Mans, but the slightly awkward, homespun looks of the prototype MA 200 were not the answer. The 428 idea really came to life at the Geneva Salon in 1965 when Hurlock, encouraged by his Swiss agent Hubert Pathey, went shopping for bodywork for what would be the first AC model to be styled by an outsider.

Bertone was approached but didn't have the capacity to produce any more bodywork. Pietro Frua's response was more positive: he promised Hurlock a running prototype by the year's end. An extended Cobra chassis was sent to Turin in May 1965, and the finished car – a plum-coloured Convertible (chassis number CF1) – was displayed at Earls Court in October.

It wasn't really finished because there was still work to do on tyre sizes and damper settings, mainly to take account of the heavier bodywork. In fact, that prototype, which would find TV fame as Tara King's car in *The Avengers*, had alloy coachwork (with a metal cover over the hood that the production Convertibles didn't have), a smaller 6.2-litre engine and quicker-ratio steering than the production 428s. Those didn't come on stream until a year later, complete with mainly steel panels that needed less inner supporting structure.

The first six examples had the relatively exotic 427cu in Ford V8, but after that the lower-powered, lower-revving and much cheaper-to-buy 428cu in unit with hydraulic tappets was settled upon. As found in various Ford Galaxies and Thunderbirds, it cost roughly half as much as the crossbolt-crank 427, which was in short supply anyway.

AC sent the rigid chassis of 4in tubes out to Turin on slave wheels, and Frua turned them around at the rate of one or two cars a month. They then returned to Thames Ditton, where AC fitted the drivetrains and interiors, stove-enamelled the chassis, tried to sort out some of the poor-quality Italian welding (428s always had a corrosion problem) and had the chroming redone locally.

There was a choice of 14 body colours, with black, red or cream leather (most were black) and chromed, 72-spoke Borrani wire wheels or Minilite alloys. Avon tyres were settled on after it was found that Dunlops made the steering too heavy and Michelins were good in the dry but not the wet. The Ford Toploader four-speed manual was standard (the first three cars were manual Convertibles), with the C6 three-speed auto as a £163 option running the higher 2.88:1 differential. In the end, automatic 428s would outnumber manuals by two-to-one.

At first there was some talk of offering as an option a 400bhp version of the V8 with solid tappets that would allow the engine to hit higher revs – the hydraulic tappets 'pumped up'. But 345bhp (that's gross US horsepower) and 145mph were deemed enough in what was probably the fastest-accelerating true road car you could buy at the time.

The 428 would be the last car that Frua built in his own workshop, and in truth he had the contract to produce only the first 50 anyway. It was an absurdly expensive and time-consuming process, and Hurlock, who did much of the development driving in the 428, was always hopeful that he would find a British coachbuilder.

He got close to a deal with Coventry Motor Panels, and there were even early thoughts of doing the shell in glassfibre. In the end, though, it would be the lack of an affordable and logistically sensible source of bodywork that was the main reason – although not the only reason – for the 428's demise.

In 1968, however, there was still enough faith in the 428 concept to introduce a coupé or Fastback version at the Paris Salon. It appears that this is the point at which the project gained some proper momentum. Press advertising appeared – often in *Country Life*, which says something about the traditional AC clientele – and full-blown road-tests of the closed car were done by both *Autocar* and *Motor*.

By the end of '69, it was reported that AC had built 60 428s, with a six-month waiting list, and was allegedly making them at the rate of two a week – when they could get the bodies from strike-bound Italy. Buyers included Formula One privateer Rob Walker, who replaced his Face Vega Facel II with a Convertible (he had problems with it overheating) and The Who drummer Keith Moon, who had a late Fastback. Moon didn't have a licence but would drive the car when the mood took him, taking over the wheel from his long-suffering chauffeur – sometimes with disastrous results – but always leaving his driver to take the blame.

All the time, AC was working through development problems centred around irritating details such as the lack of footwell ventilation, overheating in traffic and loss of oil pressure at sustained high revs; twin electric fans and an oil cooler addressed those issues. Splined driveshafts and rubber bushes – replacing balljoints – cured the clonks from

Vision is excellent in both variants

The AC's profile carries strong echoes of Frua's earlier Maserati Mistral, but little is shared between the two the rear suspension. As for tyres and damper settings, the definitive solutions were left in the hands of later owners. In fairness, with a workforce of 150 and just four dealers, AC was a tiny operation that still prided itself on personal service. It was able, for instance, to tune the 428's ride and driving position to individual buyers' tastes.

From 1970, deliveries from Frua were ever more erratic and, in the days before the UK had joined the EEC, buying bodywork from Italy had tax implications that kept the 428's price high – a vicious £7010 by 1973, easily enough for two E-types. It wasn't the pricing or the Oil Crisis that killed off the 428, however, but Ford. When the company said it would no longer supply engines direct to AC, but only via a local agent, Hurlock decided he'd had enough. The last 428 was built in July 1973, although there were nine outstanding orders from HR Owen.

The 428 was one of Hurlock's favourite cars. He ran one himself for years, but was probably wise in abandoning the idea of the 429, a four-seater coupé design that Peter Monteverdi rejected after his fall-out with *Signor* Frua.

If you are going to be greedy and own two AC 428s, then Adrian Dawn has the ideal combination of a manual Convertible and an automatic Fastback. The open car, chassis CF17, is, believe it or not, the 17th 428 built, delivered new in May 1969. Chassis CFX73 is one of the last Fastbacks, constructed late in 1972 or possibly early '73. Adrian also has one of the five 428s that were converted into Cobra replicas – "In the days when 428s weren't worth a lot," he says with a grin. One further car (CFX18) was transformed into an Aceca Special out of a wrecked 428.

The uninitiated might take these cars to be Maseratis. It's true that the basic shape was heavily influenced by Frua's Mistral design, although they shared only doorhandles and quarterlights. The Mistral is a pretty car, yet the 428 has a bullish machismo of its own that is enhanced on Adrian's cars by subtly wider Borrani wires, much like a musclebound athlete in a close-fitting suit.

At the front, the V8 is crammed into the engine bay. You can see how it might have struggled to get airflow, but Adrian says neither car has overheating issues. At the rear, both variants have deep, square boots, twin tanks and twin fillers. Brimmed to 18 gallons, they made the 428s quite decisively tail-heavy.

The hood on the Convertible is easy to lower and, with no particular sill to negotiate (the chassis tubes are well inboard), getting into either car is easy. The '69 Convertible has the prettier fascia, with eight chrome-bezelled instruments in a handsome binnacle and an outbreak of 'Guinness bottle' toggle switches on the centre console. The late Fastback has the post-1970 Federal dashboard, with a similar instrument arrangement but cheaper-looking rocker switches that feel vague when prodded. Hurlock was very tall so the driving position accommodates all sizes, the only oddities being slightly offset pedals and the way the long gearlever in the manual is cranked markedly forward. There's loads of glass area in the Fastback so views out are wonderful – or they would be if it hadn't misted up so easily in the rain that beset our photoshoot.

AC 428

Sold/number built 1966-'73/81 (51 Convertibles, 30 Fastbacks)
Construction steel tubular chassis, welded steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 7014cc 90° Ford V8, four-barrel Holley carburettor; 345bhp @ 4600rpm; 462lb ft @ 2800rpm
Transmission Ford Toploader four-speed manual or C6 three-speed automatic, RWD via a Salisbury Powr-Lok differential
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, Armstrong telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes Girling discs, with twin servos
Length 14ft 8in (4470mm)
Width 5ft 7in (1702mm)
Height 4ft 3in (1295mm)
Wheelbase 8ft (2438mm)
Weight 3143lb (1425kg)
0-60mph 5.9 secs
Top speed 145mph **Mpg** 14-18
Price new £5573 ('68)

From top: unburstable Ford V8 offers immense torque and a great soundtrack; familiar badge of the renowned Thames Ditton marque; Convertible's plentiful toggle switches were ditched for the later Fastback model

Spacious cabin is packed with dials – note the heavily cranked gearlever

Clockwise from above: V8 sits well back; luxurious Fastback lacks some of the Convertible's charm; 428 was a strict two-seater; fuel filler blends into C-pillar

Low-slung and long in the bonnet, both have a decadent burble that would bring out the cad in anybody: it's a lazy sound somehow out of phase with the epic acceleration that is just a caress away. In 1966, the 428 must have given new meaning to the word 'effortless'. Manual or automatic gears seem irrelevant in these brawny but docile machines. In the manual, you can't push the shift hard or move it fast, but, somehow, it goes through smooth and positive every time. Surprisingly, the clutch isn't particularly hefty. First is quite long, but really this car isn't fussed which gear you pull away in. Just as AC advertised, it will cheerfully take fourth from 15mph without a shudder, drawn seamlessly away on the silken pulse of eight high-compression pistons.

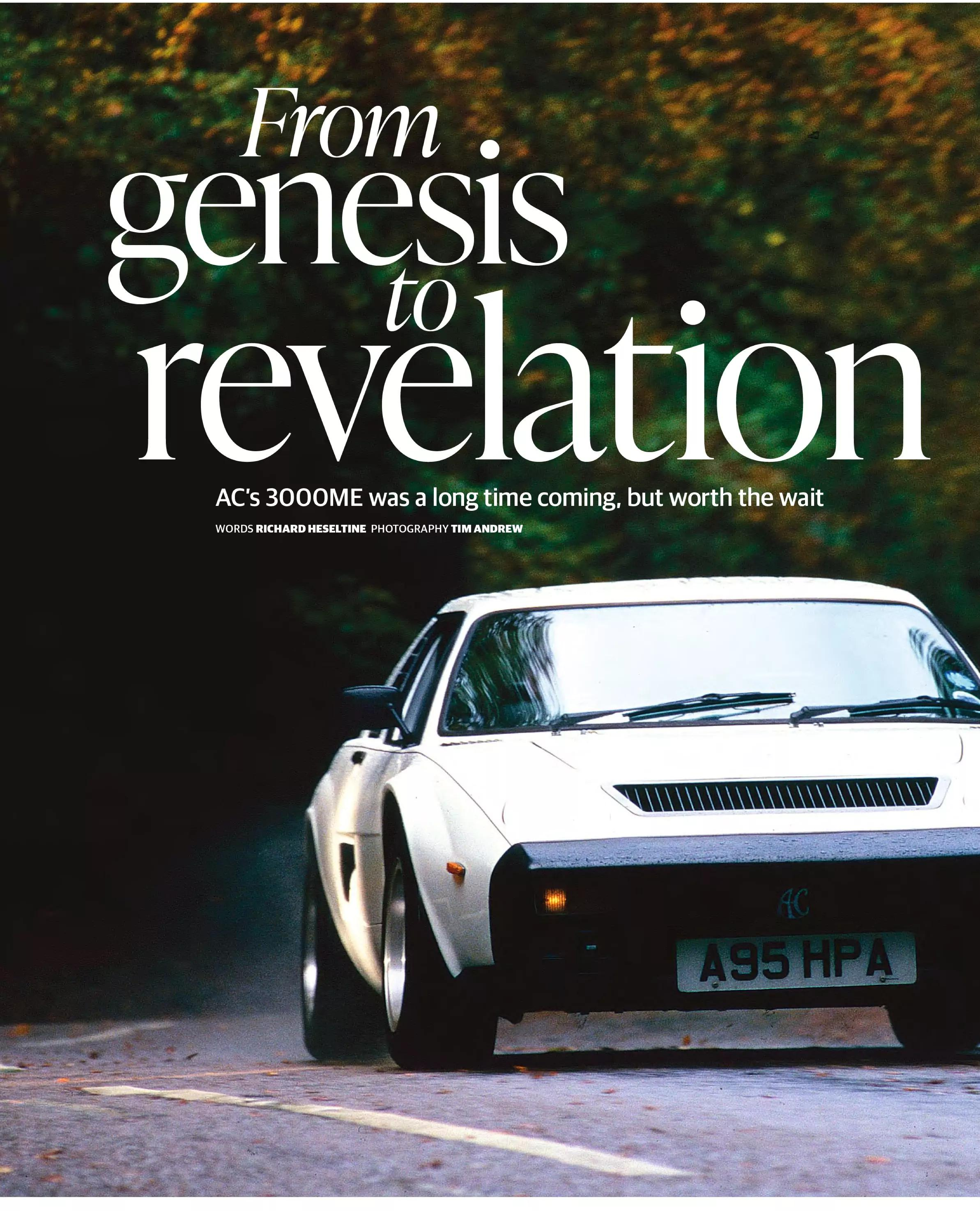
In a way, the automatic, with the hooped or inverted horseshoe-shaped selector, is even more impressive, more in the spirit of what the 428 was about. Squeeze its throttle with any sort of meaning and the coupé just romps away in one great, linear lunge with only minor alterations in engine note to indicate gearchanges. It's a feeling of such dominant, fascinating power that I don't think I would ever get tired of it or immune to it. There is no drama in what could easily have been a hooligan's car. Both will chirp their rear wheels, but the limited-slip differentials keep everything lined up as the car – be it automatic or manual – obediently turns torque into horizon-chomping forward thrust.

With a chassis engineered for anti-squat and anti-dive (and running just about the widest tyres you would have found on any car in the late 1960s and early '70s), both the Fastback and the Convertible feel totally at ease and entirely stable. Curves, crests and bends of either the strung-out or bunched-up varieties present the flat-cornering, neutral-steering 428 with no difficulties. The ride is mildly vintage, but the Convertible is as free from rattles and scuttle shake as the Fastback. You don't get much steering lock for parking, but I didn't consider the lively, unassisted helm unduly weighty in either car.

The AC 428 was, in some ways, a machine born out of its time. Drive one and you feel that it is a vehicle more in the raffish 1930s image of a Railton, a Brough Superior or a low-chassis Invicta than the '60s jet-set machine that its suave Frua styling suggests. It has muscles and elegance, and is at once a car for both the moustache-twirling bounder and the square-jawed hero. Once sampled, it leaves an impression that takes days to fade – and it might just be my new favourite car.

To date, 61 of the original 81 428s are accounted for and seldom parted with. Factoring in the Cobra replicas and the lost-in-action 1970s write-offs, that's still a handful left to find, so there's hope yet...

English ambience meets Italian style and Detroit muscle



From genesis to revelation

AC's 3000ME was a long time coming, but worth the wait

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TIM ANDREW**

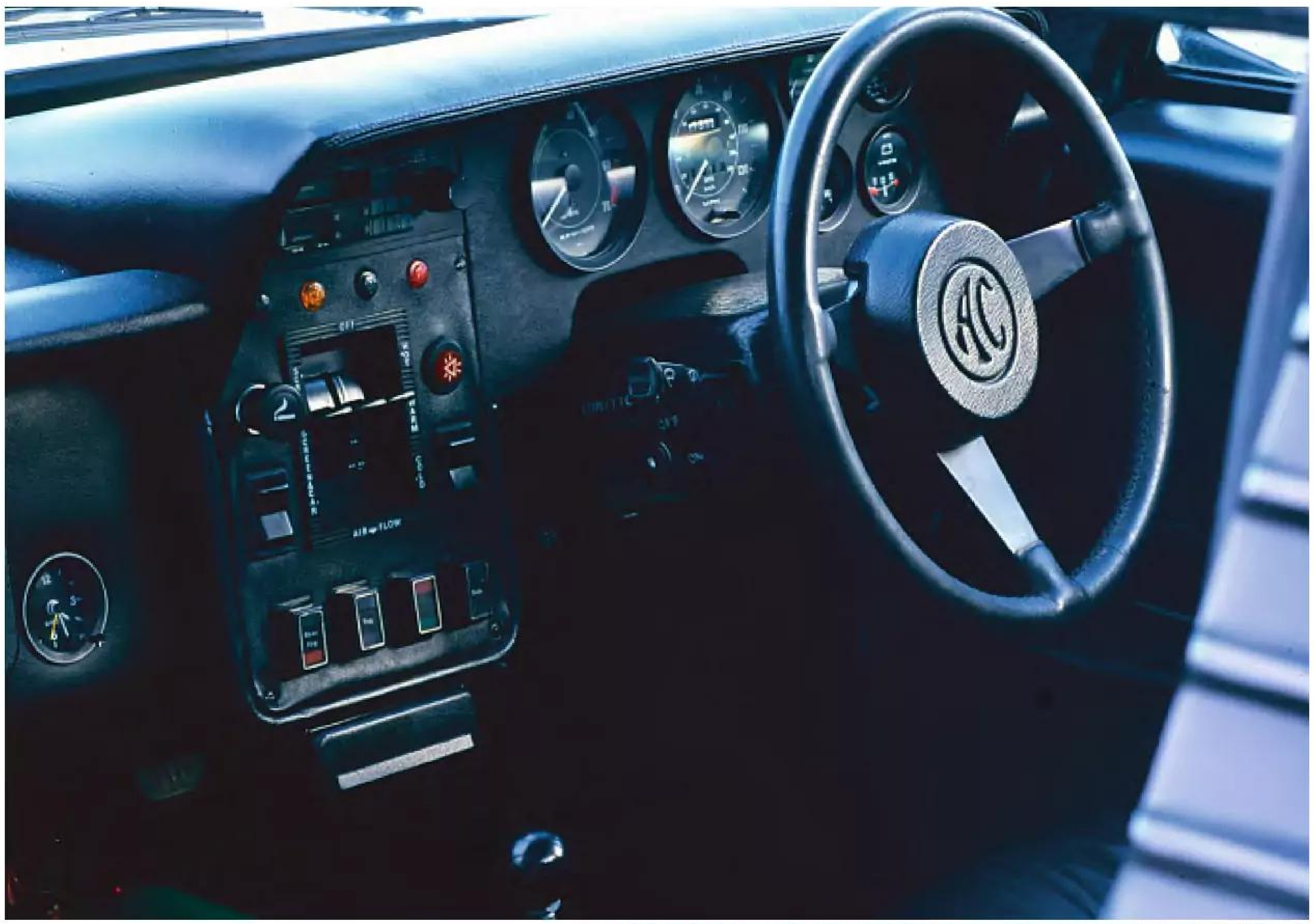
Occasionally, a car with no backing behind it or badge cachet pops out of the leftfield, catching everyone off-guard while fuelling much media hot air. The motoring press then waxes lyrical as said vehicle ascends into the stratosphere like a rocket, only to spiral back down to earth as a scorched stick when it becomes last week's news.

By rights, the Bohanna Stables Diablo should have been a prime example. Devised and built by two former motorsport mechanics with no prior automotive design experience, it wowed the crowds when it was unveiled at the 1972 Racing Car Show. Magazines dedicated whole editorials to the newcomer, discussing how two blokes in a shed managed to produce such a vision of lovelines . But with no chance of it realistically entering production, that should have been that, with the Diablo destined for a future mystery-car graveyard, along with the Ikenga and Siva S530.

The Diablo was simply too good to die, however. Project instigators Robin Stables and Peter Bohanna were too proud to let their handiwork come to nought. Which is where AC comes in. The famed Thames Ditton concern was nearing the end of 428 production, and the build process for its Maserati Mistral crib was time-consuming and laborious – the erratic supply of bodies from Latin *carrozzeria* Frua made a mockery of delivery dates. It needed another product, and fast. Bohanna had made contact with TVR and AC. Both expressed great interest in buying the rights to the project, but Bohanna and Stables felt that the latter was more likely to build it in volume. It was a view that they would later have cause to regret.

In 1972, AC announced that production of the Diablo would commence the following year. First there was the small matter of developing the car, starting with the first major flaw in the plan: the choice of engine. Powering the prototype was nothing more exotic than the 1750cc 'four' from the Austin Maxi – a car that was unfashionable even then. Front-to-back Maxi mechanicals wearing a suave, glassfibre disguise weren't to going to cut it with sports-car buyers, so Ford's lusty Essex V6 was substituted. The changes didn't end there. A new chassis was deemed necessary, the original car's spaceframe being junked in favour of a box-section affair with a central unit. A new gearbox was required, so Bohanna and engineer Bill Wilson created a five-speed with help from Ford and Hewland. Suspension, fabricated in-house, was independent all round, by unequal-length wishbones, coil springs and telescopic dampers.

By 1974, changes to the body had been finalised: the nose was trimmed, the roof slightly raised and the bonnet altered. But there was still no sign of the car entering production. By 1976 it was ready for crash testing. Bohanna and Stables had walked off the project, leaving to design the kit-form Nymph utility-vehicle-cum-sunlounger.



Clockwise from above: interior has a parts-bin feel, but the ergonomics work well enough; B-pillar vents help cool the engine; Wolfrace slot-mags cement the 3000ME in the 1970s

Finally, at the October 1978 NEC Motor Show, the newly christened AC 3000ME was offered for public consumption. Not that anyone really noticed. Just 71 cars had found new homes by April 1984 when the rights were sold to entrepreneur David MacDonald. The independent AC (Scotland) plc had grandiose plans for the car, which was to be built in economically depressed Glasgow. Former De Lorean robots were bought, and the omnipresent Peter Stevens was employed to give the car a makeover. But the firm crashed in October 1985, by which time a further 30 cars had been completed. Rising like a turkey from the project's ashes came the awful Signature Ecosse, with Abarth-Fiat power, but this misshapen coupé found no success.

Today, the 3000ME is greatly misunderstood – a lonely throwback with a small adoring retinue. Because of its protracted genesis, it has been unfairly labelled a problem child. Stories abound of dodgy handling on or near the limit, an irascible gearbox – with which changing gears becomes a battle of wills – and variable build quality. And they are just stories, because this most modish of ACs is actually a cracking little car. In the plastic it appears squat and serious without being bull-necked: the silhouette exudes ballsy chic. It's exuberant rather than explicit, with bulging flanks and a priapic snout that are both nods to supercar pretensions.

From head-on, the nose is clean and uncluttered. There's no unnecessary addenda to ruin the picture. Even the large vents at the base of the windscreen – only one of them is functional, providing cabin ventilation – do not detract. The roofline is square-cut, the attractive slats on the B-pillar being there to feed air into the engine bay rather than as mere garnish. From the rear three-quarter, the AC appears especially accomplished. The proprietary tail-light clusters (from a Triumph Toledo, like the front sidelights) are neatly integrated into the mix, while the cropped buttresses and raised rear decklid are both thoughtfully conceived. It's hard to believe that the car was penned in the early '70s. Only those Wolfrace slot-mags – forever fixed in that decade – dilute the illusion.

While the styling undoubtedly appeals to Top-Trumping spotty schoolboys, it's patently for grown-ups, too, though the ME's cockpit is a DiY fantasist's wonderland. Stoop to avoid the low roof and, having made the Procrustean effort to get comfortable, you feel decidedly let down. Like so many specialist sports cars, the AC's interior looks almost unfinished – it's all exposed screwheads and spot-the-donor instruments. There's class here somewhere, but it's well hidden. The deeply contoured seats are surprisingly comfortable, though, and there's ample shoulder and headroom. The unlovely steering wheel fronts a purposeful crackle-black dash. Most of the instruments are legible behind the wheel's thick rim, and the pedals are closely spaced. The chrome gearlever jutting out of the delicious polished

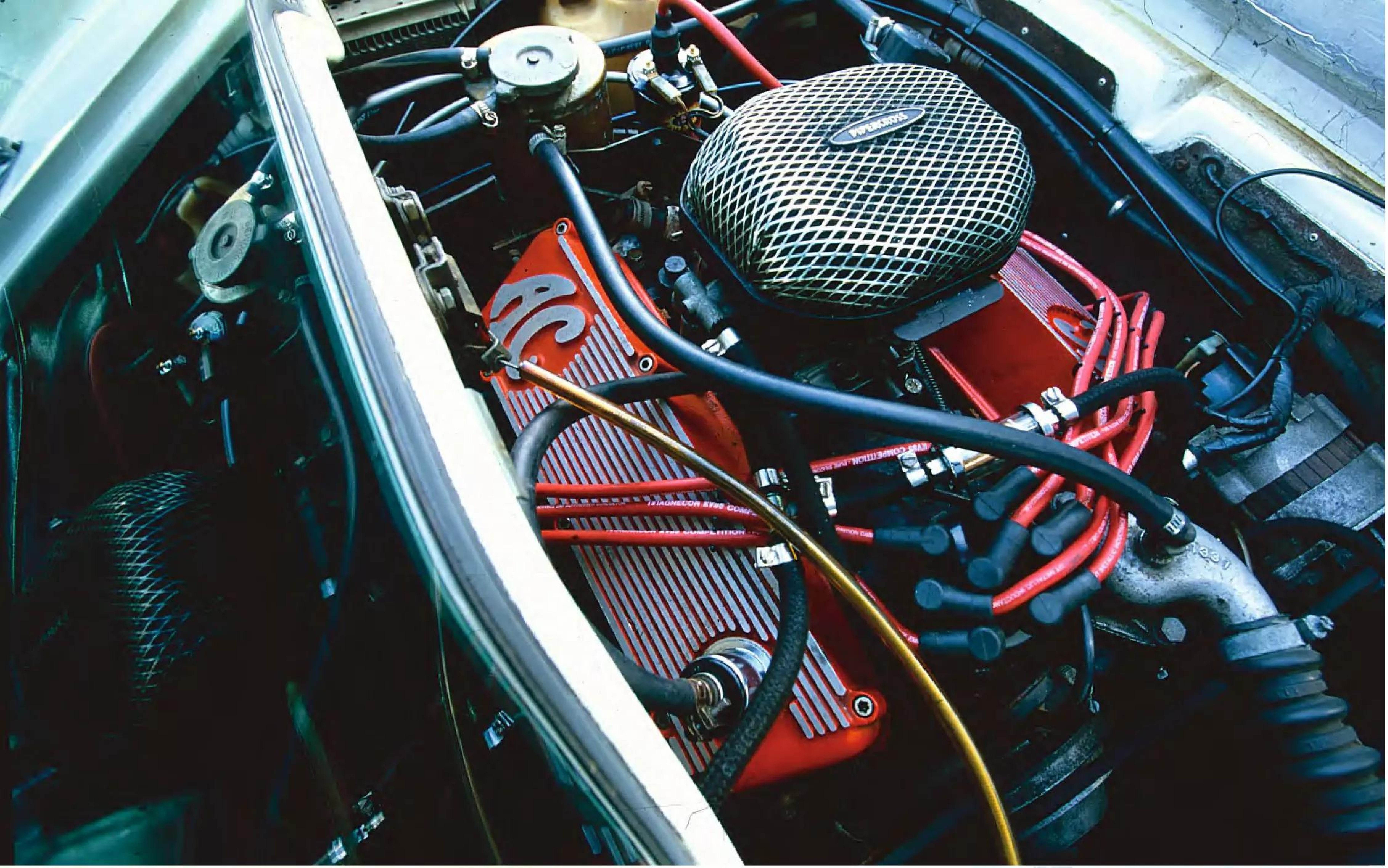
'This most modish of ACs is actually a cracking little car. In the plastic it appears squat and serious without being bull-necked. The silhouette exudes ballsy chic'

THE LIFE OF BRIAN'S 3000ME

Brian Mosely originally considered buying a Ginetta G15 before opting for the AC. He has had it for 10 years, recently restoring the car to its present impeccable condition. A keen pedaller, he's campaigned the car in AC Owners' Club sprints and track days, and carried out a couple of modifications. Brian says: "With a decent cam and exhaust, you can get quite a lot more out of the engine."

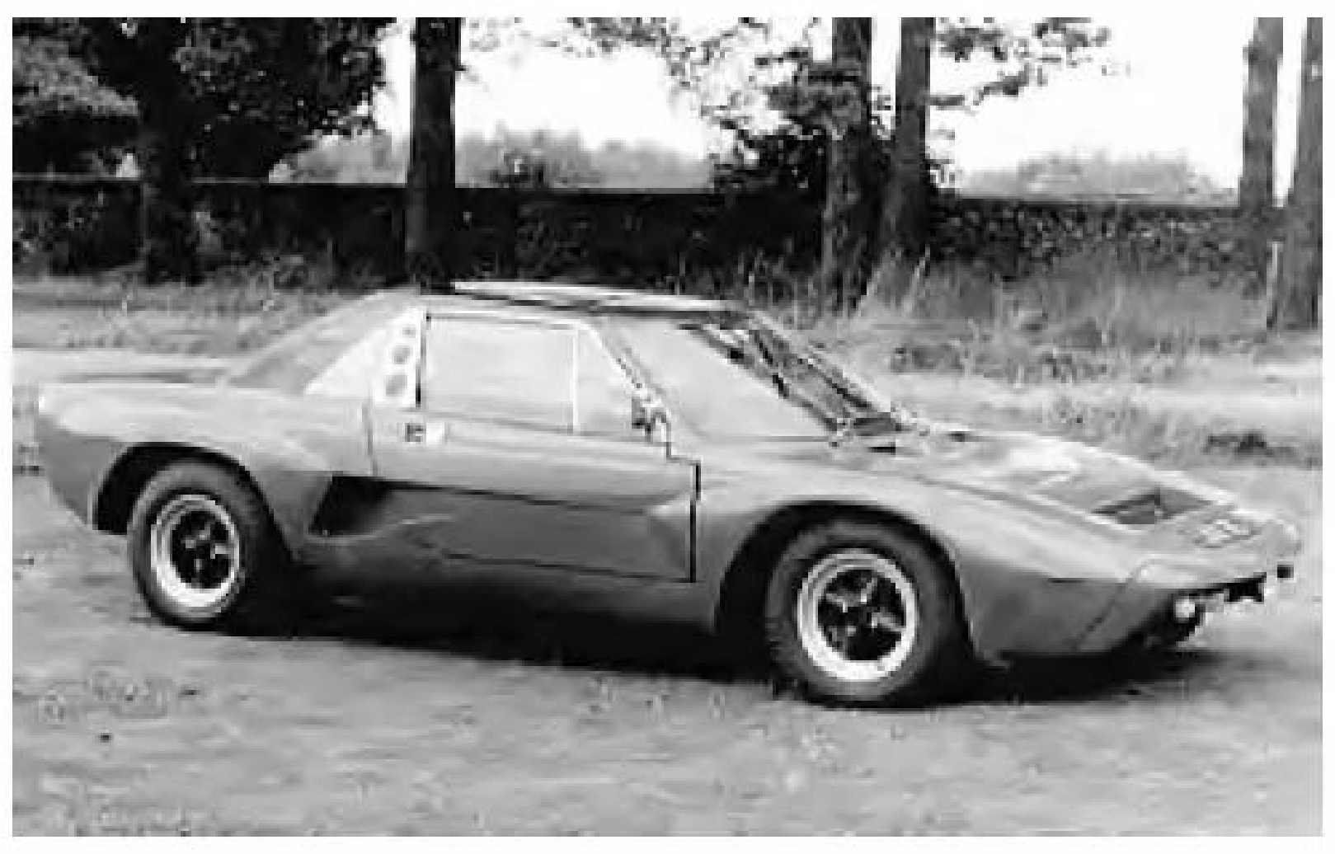
Has he ever considered opting for a turbocharger conversion? "No," he replies. "They produce a lot of heat, which can lead to all sorts of problems, and it's quite telling that many cars have been returned to non-turbo specification in recent years."

So what's the appeal? "I love the looks," he enthuses, "and it's surprisingly practical for a car of this type."



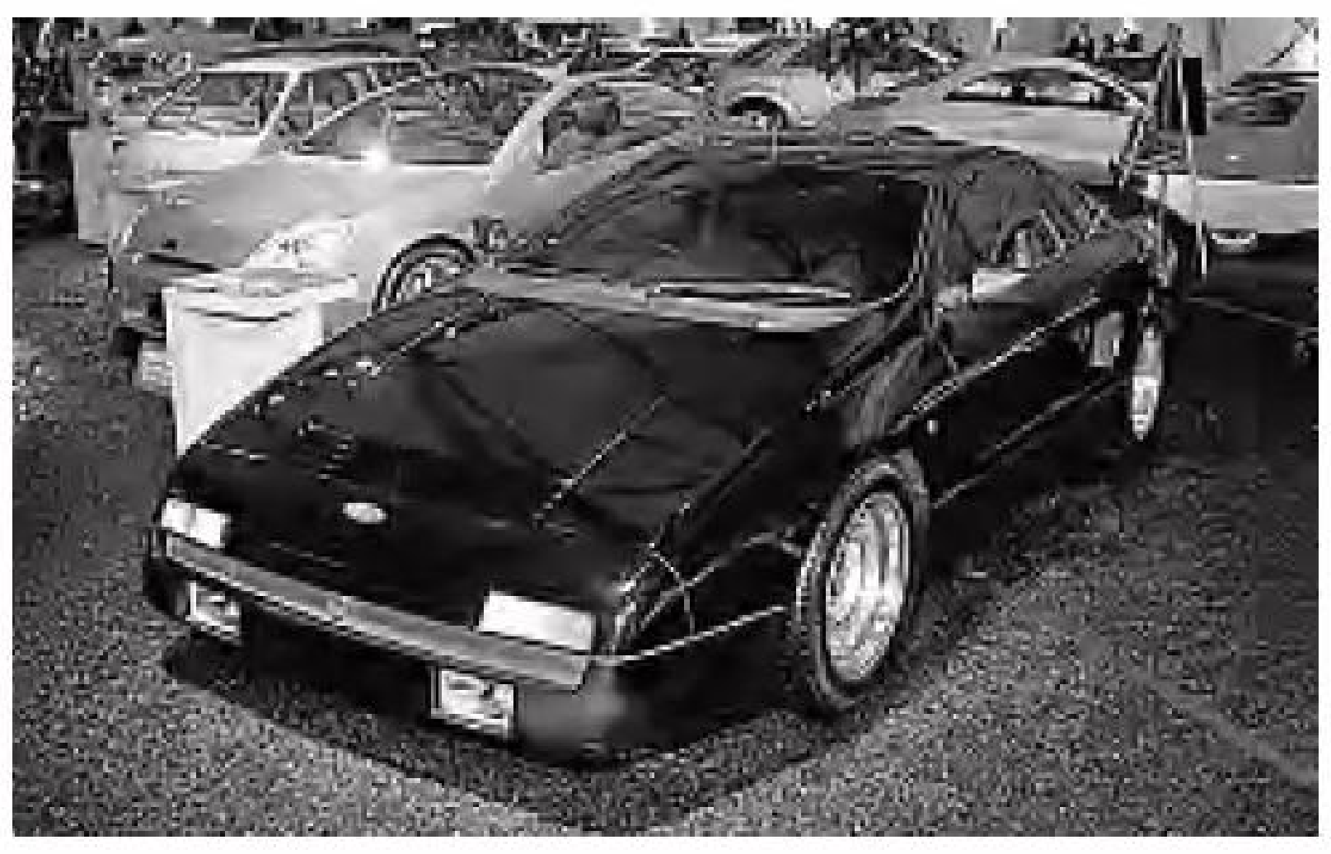
Clockwise from above: 3-litre Ford 'Essex' V6 makes 138bhp and drives through an AC-built five-speed gearbox; dinky pop-up headlight; the ME lacks power but is an engaging B-road tool, with good grip and body control

VARIATIONS ON THE THEME



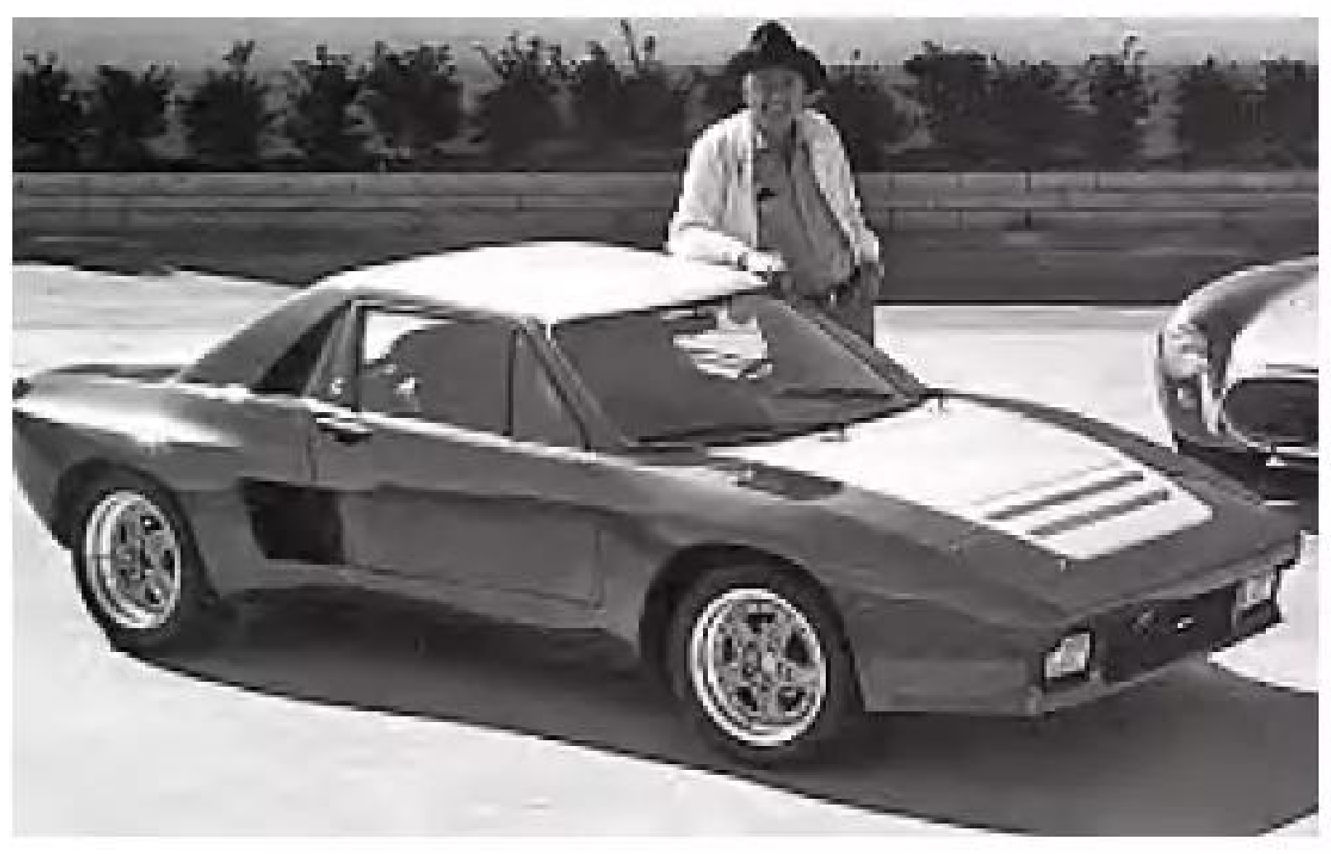
DIABLO

Former Lola racing mechanics Peter Bohanna and Robin Stables' Diablo project grew out of a stillborn Unipower design. Neither had prior experience in car design, but the Diablo reeked of originality. With input from suspension man Mike Smith, the low-slung glassfibre coupé had its debut in 1972, though it had been conceived four years earlier. Plans to offer the car in kit form were dropped following AC's interest.



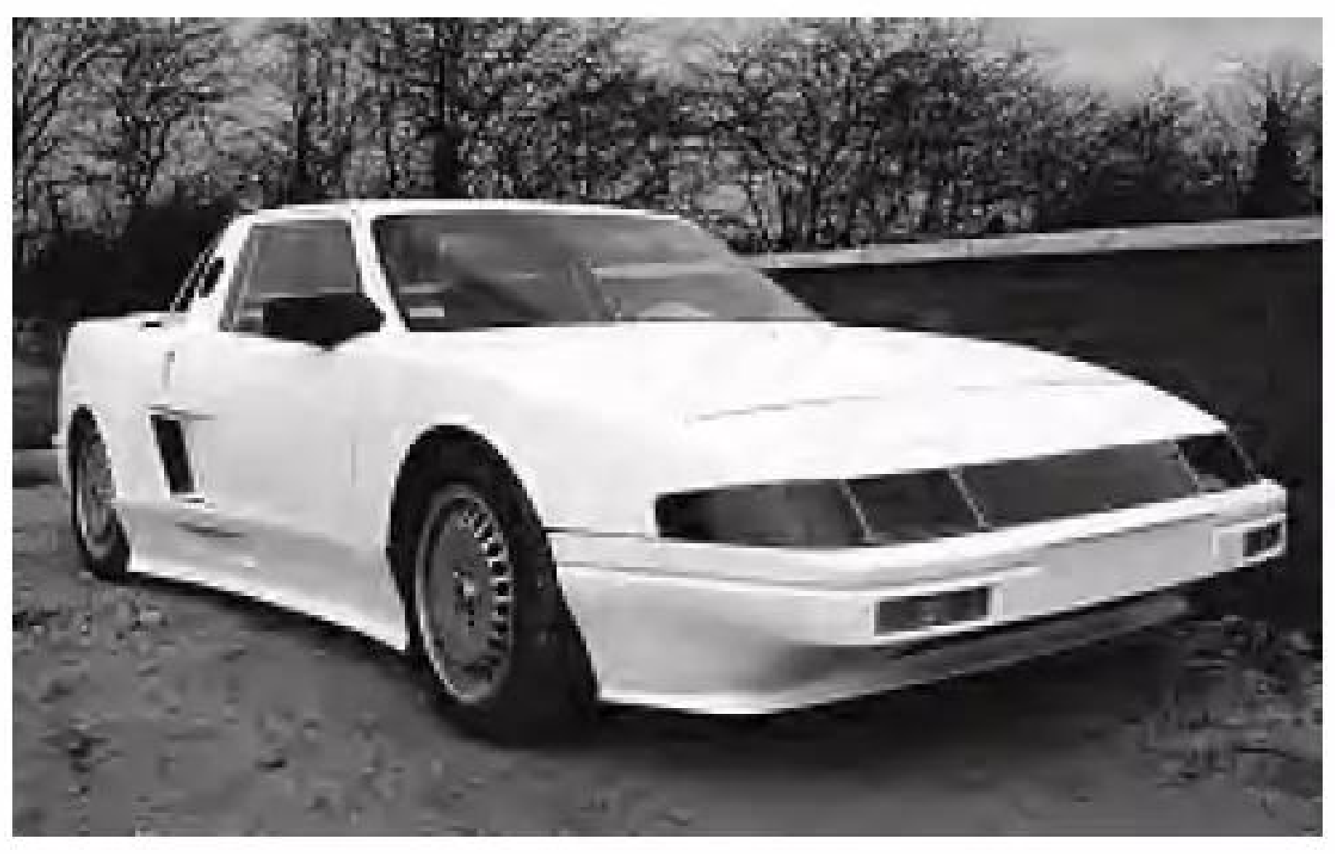
AC GHIA

Ford's Italian styling arm Ghia unleashed its own take on the theme in '81 as a potential rally car. Based on an ME chassis – shortened by eight inches – the AC Ghia was a running prototype, rather than a show queen, fêted by the media for its exceptionally pretty styling. There was talk of the car entering production with Ford backing, a run of 500 units a year being mooted. But these plans proved shortlived and it remains unique.



SHELBY ME

The only ME to venture Stateside was ordered by 'Mr Cobra' himself, Carroll Shelby, in early 1982. On a retainer to Chrysler to inject a little sparkle into its range of humdrum saloons, the Texan racing legend used the subtly restyled car as a concept vehicle. The Ford V6 was junked in favour of a 2.2-litre Chrysler turbo 'four'. But it was never intended as anything other than a one-off, so there was to be no 'new Cobra', more's the pity.



ECOSSE SIGNATURE

During the ME's tenure with AC (Scotland), Peter Stevens was a styling consultant. There was no money in the kitty to design a car from scratch. So the plan was for new front and rear ends plus Alfa V6 power. The firm crashed before Stevens' vision was realised, but his renderings were (mis)interpreted by David MacDonald and former BRM man Aubrey Woods for the hideous Ecosse Signature. Just two were made – mercifully.

'On twisty back-roads the 3000ME remains unflustered as you scamper from point A to point B and press on with confidence'

H-gate adds a welcome, almost Italianate touch of sophistication, but, despite its considerate ergonomics, the 3000ME's cabin remains resolutely underwhelming.

For all the build-up to the AC's debut in the media, few road tests appeared at the time; Those that did were usually scathing. If they were to be believed, the 3000ME was a good looker but pretty hopeless at the hard stuff, such as cornering efficiently or sprinting off the starting blocks. But spend more than five minutes behind the wheel and you'll be swayed otherwise. Surrey's finest doesn't provide the fully immersive experience of a Lotus Esprit, with which it bears obvious comparison, but in many ways it's a better car.

The first thing that strikes you is the reassuring sense of security. The AC feels rigid with no crashing, banging or ghosts in the machine. The ride quality is firm, with little resonance reaching the cabin (unlike in an Esprit, for example). The clamour from the 3-litre V6 sited just inches behind you proffers more throaty cacophony than cultured roar. But there's a smoothness to its delivery, with that all-important responsiveness at low revs: the power kicks in early, pulling strongly and eagerly. There's so much torque that you're never going to be kept waiting.

Then there is the gearbox. This much-maligned unit isn't the last word in driver interaction, not your hot-knife-though-butter cliché, but there's a satisfying meeting of metal on metal with each change. Lightning shifts aren't an option, but be a little more subtle in your approach and it responds to your tactility. Similarly, the rack-and-pinion steering feels meaty in an old-school sports car manner, but it is always communicative, giving a detailed briefing on what the front wheels are doing.

On twisty back-roads the 3000ME remains unflustered as you scamper from point A to point B; there's enough seat-of-the-pants feel to press on with confidence. Tight body control, allied to prodigious grip from the fat boots, makes for an enticing package, and it's only on tighter bends that you sense the front end wanting to run wide. Contemporary tests talk of understeer spilling into snap oversteer, but you would need to goad the AC into doing something silly. The brakes offer effortless retardation without the car following the road's camber. The ME is utterly trustworthy and reassuring to drive at speed.

The only thing missing from the AC's dynamic repertoire is raw performance. This isn't a slow car – not even remotely sluggish – but the chassis could patently handle more power. It comes as no great surprise that around 40 were fitted with turbos, although many have since been swapped back .

Yet it's hard to criticise the 3000ME because it is so honest. There's nothing pretentious in its make-up, no image-conscious hauteur. It's just a good car with a bad reputation, in search of redemption.

AC 3000ME

Sold/number built 1979-'85/1 Diablo; 4 AC prototypes; 66 RHD and 5 LHD production cars (Thames Ditton); 1 RHD and 2 LHD factory customised Specials; 30 RHD production cars (Glasgow); 1 AC Ecosse with Alfa Romeo power; 2 Ecosse Signatures
Construction steel perimeter frame with central punt and glassfibre bodyshell
Engine all-iron, ohv 2994cc V6, single carburettor
Max power 138bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 174lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** discs
Length 13ft 1in (3988mm)
Width 5ft 5in (1651mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1143mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6½in (2299mm)
Weight 2483lb (1128kg)
0-60mph 8 secs
Top speed 125mph **Mpg** 21
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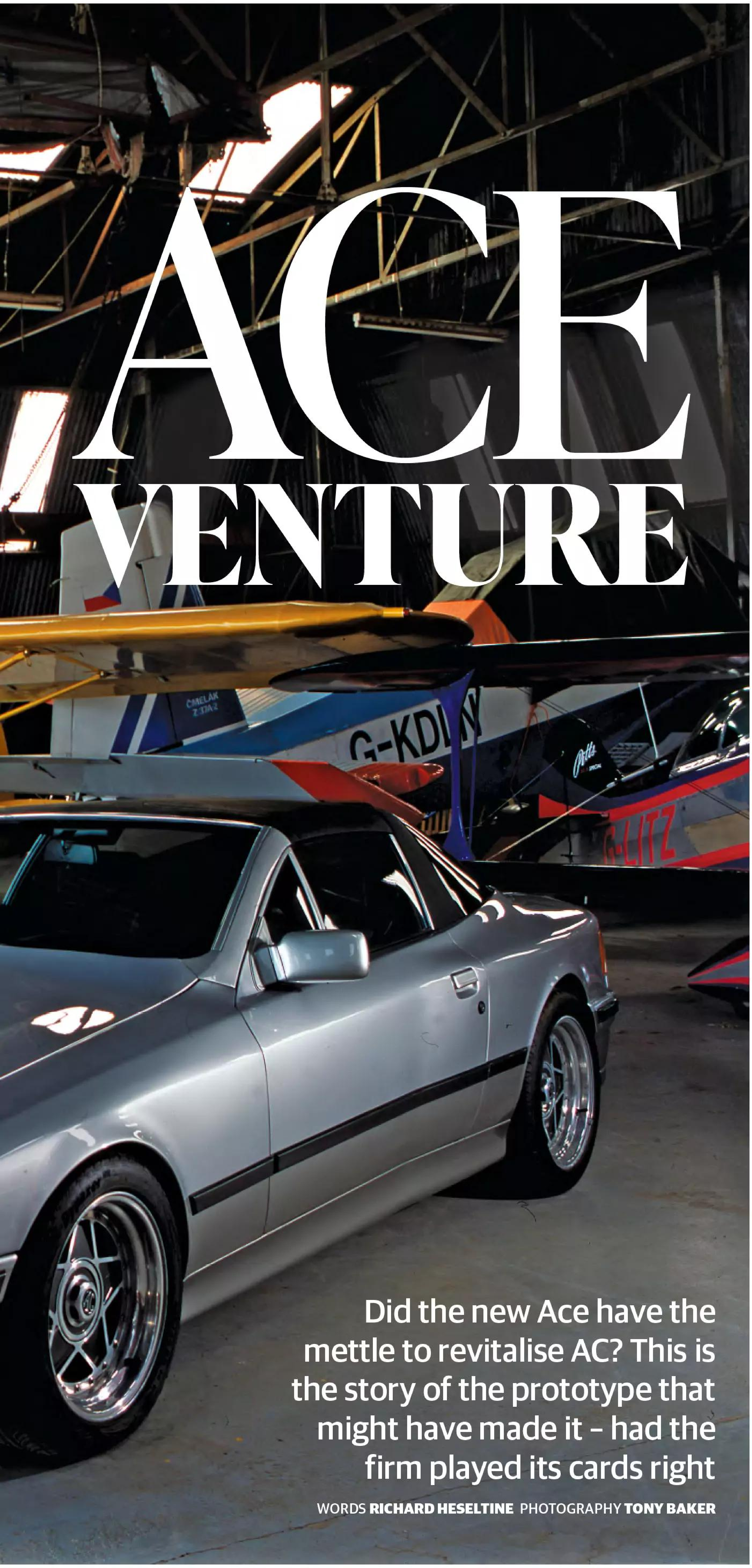
ACE VENTURE



Did the new Ace have the mettle to revitalise AC? This is the story of the prototype that might have made it – had the firm played its cards right

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

For AC, expectation has never been in short supply – and rarely more so than in November 1986, when the wraps were lifted off a new coupé that promised to revive the flagging marque's fortunes. With backing from Ford – it took top billing on the Blue Oval's NEC show stand – success seemed to be a mere formality. But from the jaws of victory, the reborn Ace grabbed defeat – in injury time.

At least that's one assumption. The truth is, this distinctive machine was always just a prototype, even though its debut augured well. By the dawn of the '80s, AC's bread-and-butter engineering work had all but dried up, and the sale of the 3000ME production rights to the Ravensdale Group in 1984 brought no reversal of fortune: AC (Scotland) Ltd went under the following year. Faring better was Brian Angliss' CP Autokraft company, which in 1982 had been granted an exclusive 25-year licence 'to use and exploit the trademark AC' for its beautifully crafted Cobra clones.

Ford entered the scene in 1984, with the announcement that it was to distribute the newly rebranded AC MkIV in the USA, hoping that it would add some showroom traffic. Fortunate timing, because Angliss harboured plans to build an entirely new roadster and was already working on a prototype when, in March 1986, a retiring Derek Hurlock sold his interest in AC Cars. New joint owners were Autokraft and AC Holding Ltd, which, the following year, merged to become AC Cars Ltd. Autokraft acquired 49% of shares in the new company, while the rest went to Ford for £1.3million.

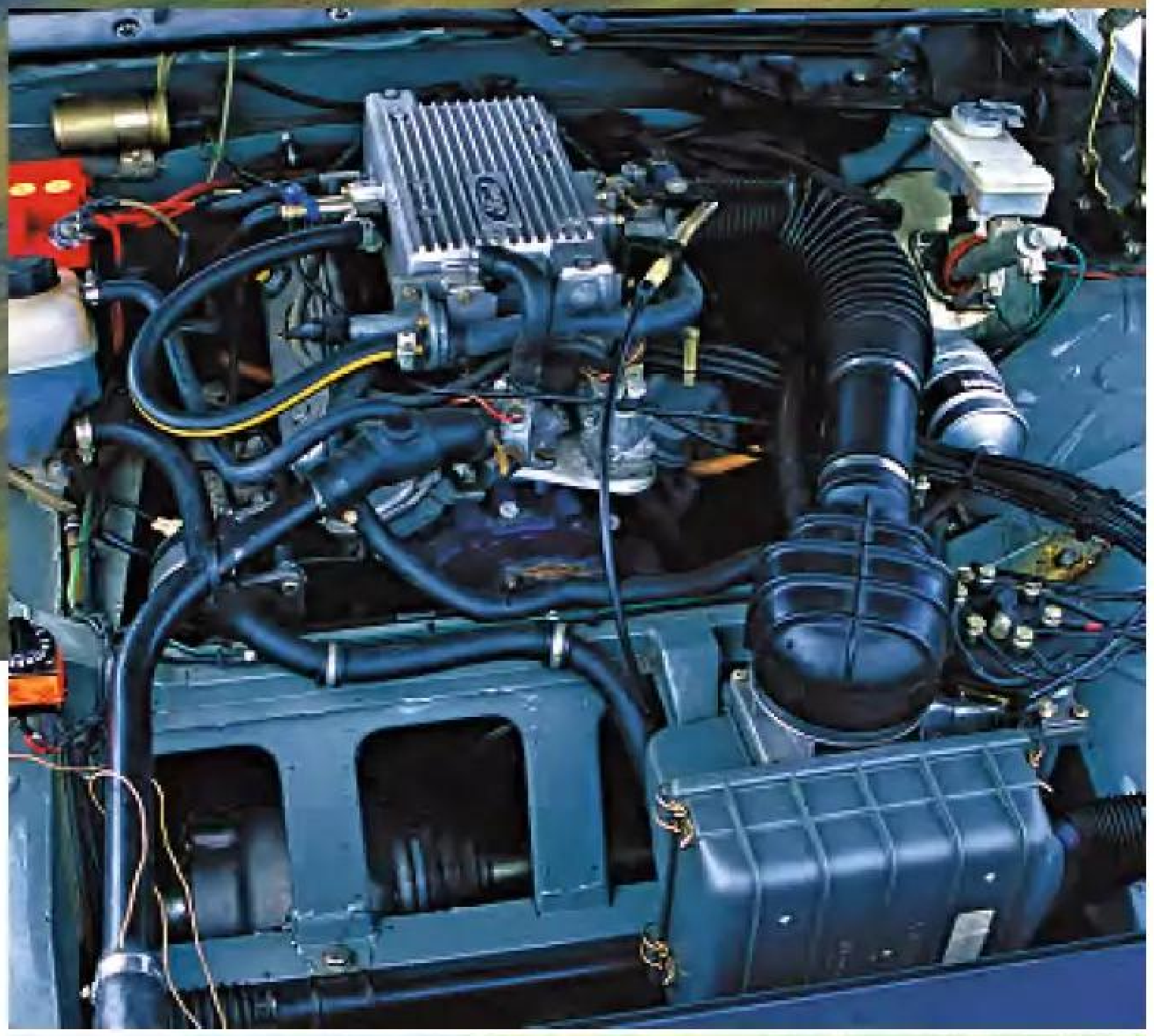
The '86 show car was a taster for what was expected to come: styled in Ford of Europe's studio and built by Autokraft, with engineering by Len Bailey. The former GT40 man came up with a Chromalloy stainless-steel monocoque using Sierra XR4x4 running gear and a 2.9-litre V6. The build took just five weeks, and a press release promised a sub-7 secs 0-60mph and 140mph. Rear-drive only and turbocharged Cosworth YB-powered variants would follow.

No they wouldn't. At the 1987 London Motorfair, Ford GB's chief exec Derek Barron announced that the Ace was to be built at a dedicated factory, but its whereabouts were never disclosed. Relations between AC's custodians soured, and Angliss pressed on with a new plant close to the Brooklands Museum.

Amid much public hostility and frequent legal exchanges, the Ford/Autokraft marriage dissolved in 1992 – a year after Angliss had released a very different take on the Ace. His vaguely piscine roadster was styled by IAD of Worthing and used a steel chassis with rear-wheel drive and a Mustang-sourced V8.

AC under Angliss lasted until 1996 before lurching into receivership. The Pride Automotive Group fared little better, and speculation was rife for a time that the marque might live on in South Africa or Malta.

Ace prototype looks best at speed, with real presence. Below: V6 in show car – Cosworth planned for production; lift-out roof panels are thoughtfully designed



Which leaves us with this what-might-have-been. After a few turns on the show circuit, prototypes are usually reduced to landfill, but, this being AC, nothing was thrown away. It remained with the firm until a clearance sale from which it washed up with dealer Duncan Hamilton two years ago. From there it was bought by marque fan Jonathan Stevens.

It wasn't that driveable. "It did work, but had covered something like 20 or so miles," says Jonathan. "Little things such as the fuel-filler threads, which were so fine that they crossed up, needed to be sorted, as did the electrics. And it didn't have a roof or any side windows. Fortunately, I found the Lighter Motor Company in Dorset, which did a great job."

Jonathan won't be keeping it, though. "I've done my bit," he says. "It's time for someone else to enjoy it. To me it's a superb motor car."

If not quite a developed one, having only covered 1000 or so miles. As with all prototypes, there's evidence of a rushed build, not least in the engine bay. It's not particularly attractive and takes up a surprising amount of acreage, most of it bonnet. Inside, the Ford ancestry is all too obvious. The cabin is wide, comfortable and bland to the point of being invisible, and it's awash with Sierra and Scorpio switchgear that screams minicab rather than coachbuilt GT.

On the move this unique AC has presence, but it's not an exhilarating drive. The V6 sounds muscular through the perilously low stainless back pipes and it's reasonably fast. It's just that there's no real buzz. The steering is nicely weighted unless manoeuvring, and the wide tyres tend to rub against the inner arches on lock. Unfortunately, the harsh ride and woeful lack of ventilation with the roof panels in place soon render this curio a chore rather than a joy. It remains, for better or worse, a show car.

Yet you sense that the basics are all there, and if nothing else it offers a tantalising glimpse of how AC might have grown with the might of Ford behind it – just look at Aston Martin. Without it, we got the carbonfibre CRS 'Cobra' that looked less credible than most replicas, plus the misuse of another much-loved name with the woeful 'new' Aceca. Things could have been so different.

Thanks to *Brian Chant of Unicorn Garage*

Ace cabin is wide and comfortable but lacks detail finish: plentiful Ford switchgear cheapens the mood

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To be continued...

Few cars have spawned as many continuations, replicas and half-truths as the appropriately legendary AC Cobra. Here, the four best convene

WORDS **BEN BARRY** PHOTOGRAPHY **MAX EDLESTON**

Clockwise from main: MkIV is agile, but its weight has to be managed at times; 302 V8 has 'just' 220bhp, but is punchy enough; simple but luxurious cockpit

Carroll Shelby was famously said to have resprayed his AC Cobra demonstrator several times so journalists would assume Shelby American was a larger operation than it really was. When it comes to Cobras (or sometimes 'Cobras') built after the 1960s originals, we face the opposite problem: there are so many replicas, faked originals and continuations that it has become difficult to know which ones really picked up where the originals left off.

In truth there's no perfect reunion of AC Cars, Ford and Carroll Shelby, but the machines that arguably come closest were produced by Autokraft (and later the related AC Car Group Ltd) from the 1980s in the UK. Established by Brian Angliss in 1982, Autokraft was previously a Cobra restoration and parts business named Cobra Parts, but in 1982 it acquired body jigs, tooling and drawings from AC Cars' original Thames Ditton site, plus some employees.

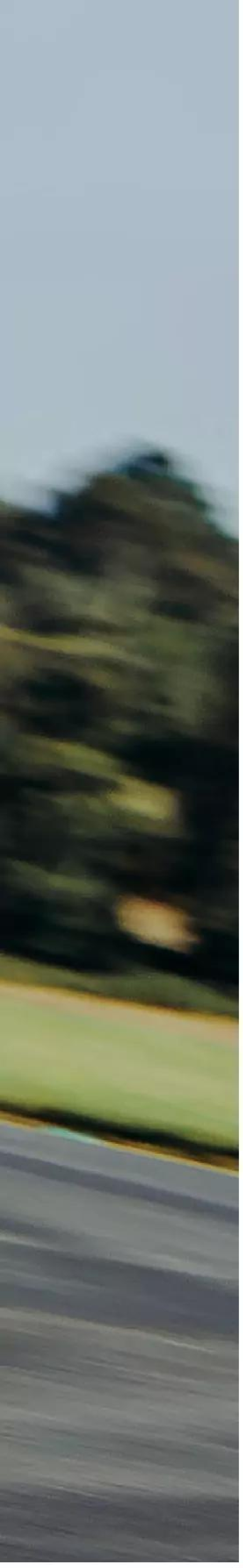
The rights to the AC name followed in 1986 after convincing owners the Hurlock family of the cars' quality, and that led to a new joint venture with Ford and the rights to the Cobra name. (Shelby also made his own licensed versions, which are incredibly sought-after today, was criticised for cloning originals with chassis numbers allocated in period but never used – and he even squabbled in *CAR* magazine's letters pages with Angliss.)

Today we're driving four ACs: the MkIV and Lightweight, both built by Autokraft, and the Superblower and CRS produced by the AC Car Group Ltd. All are supplied by Redline Engineering UK, the Ottershaw-based firm that boasts a direct link to the Autokraft days.

Director and founder Neil Fisher joined Autokraft straight from school in 1990, initially working on Angliss' collection of British racing motorcycles at the company's Brooklands premises. He left in 2001 to establish Redline and now counts Peter Duckett, originally an Angliss apprentice, among his employees.

"Autokraft was a fantastic place, and Brian was a brilliant boss," recalls Neil. "There were probably 60 or 70 staff when I joined, rising to about 110 when we were producing the Brooklands Ace. I wasn't allowed near a Cobra until I was 21, then I started on the production line doing jobs no one else wanted to do."

The MkIV was the first Autokraft Cobra. The first chassis, AK01, was produced in 1978 before Autokraft was an entity, while the last was built in 2000; around 450 were sold. Even legendary Big Three executive Bob Lutz bought one. Logically enough, the MkIV picked up where the MkIII of the 1960s left off, with independent suspension by coil springs all round rather than the transverse-leaf set-up of the earlier examples, plus a steel ladder-frame chassis with sturdier 4in tubing, an inch larger than the MkI and II (and a different gauge to the MkIII). Like the originals, an aluminium body sheathed the frame, with 40 individual,



hand-beaten pieces gas-welded together into two sections – one for the front, the other for the rear – in an unbelievably time-consuming process. A MkIV cost £45,000 new.

To meet Federal type approval, the classic dashboard was revised without toggle switches and bumper overriders were added, the latter neatly telescoping into the steel frame in the event of a light shunt. The V8 muscle came from a new 302cu in Mustang engine, either with fuel injection or a carburettor. At 5 litres but with only 220bhp, it was a way off the 7-litre Cobra 427's 425bhp, and a 1190kg kerbweight left it only a couple of heavy suitcases lighter than the similarly powerful Sierra RS Cosworth. But given the Cobra's fierce reputation and that this original, factory red MkIV is the first I've driven, I'm content to start with its relatively modest performance.

After swinging open vestigial doors that curve down below shoulder height, you are very much exposed once you've settled into the low-set bucket seats. It is surprisingly luxurious in here for such a simple car, though: imagine Rolls-Royce employees assembling a Caterham Seven and you're somewhere close. Deep-pile, red-piped carpets extend over the broad transmission tunnel, the polished silver spokes of a thin-rimmed wooden steering wheel glint in the sunshine, and plush caramel leather covers the door cards, seats and dashboard. The dials appear to be lifted from a Triumph of the Stag/Dolomite/2500 era and nicely complement the craftsmanship; the Ford switchgear with twisty plastic heater controls is less harmonious.

This is the only left-hand-drive car here, and your feet feel more cramped in this Cobra's pedalbox than they do in the right-hooker cars, plus there's less room to move longer legs, which does dent the confidence during an otherwise enjoyable drive.

Twist the key and the big V8 wakes with a phlegmy burble that bursts with attitude – no matter that its bark suggests far more than the bite. There's the physicality you expect of such a beefy machine, with a relatively heavy clutch and unassisted steering, but muscularity soon gives way to delicacy with speed, as the steering jiggles gently in your hands and the clutch moves freely.

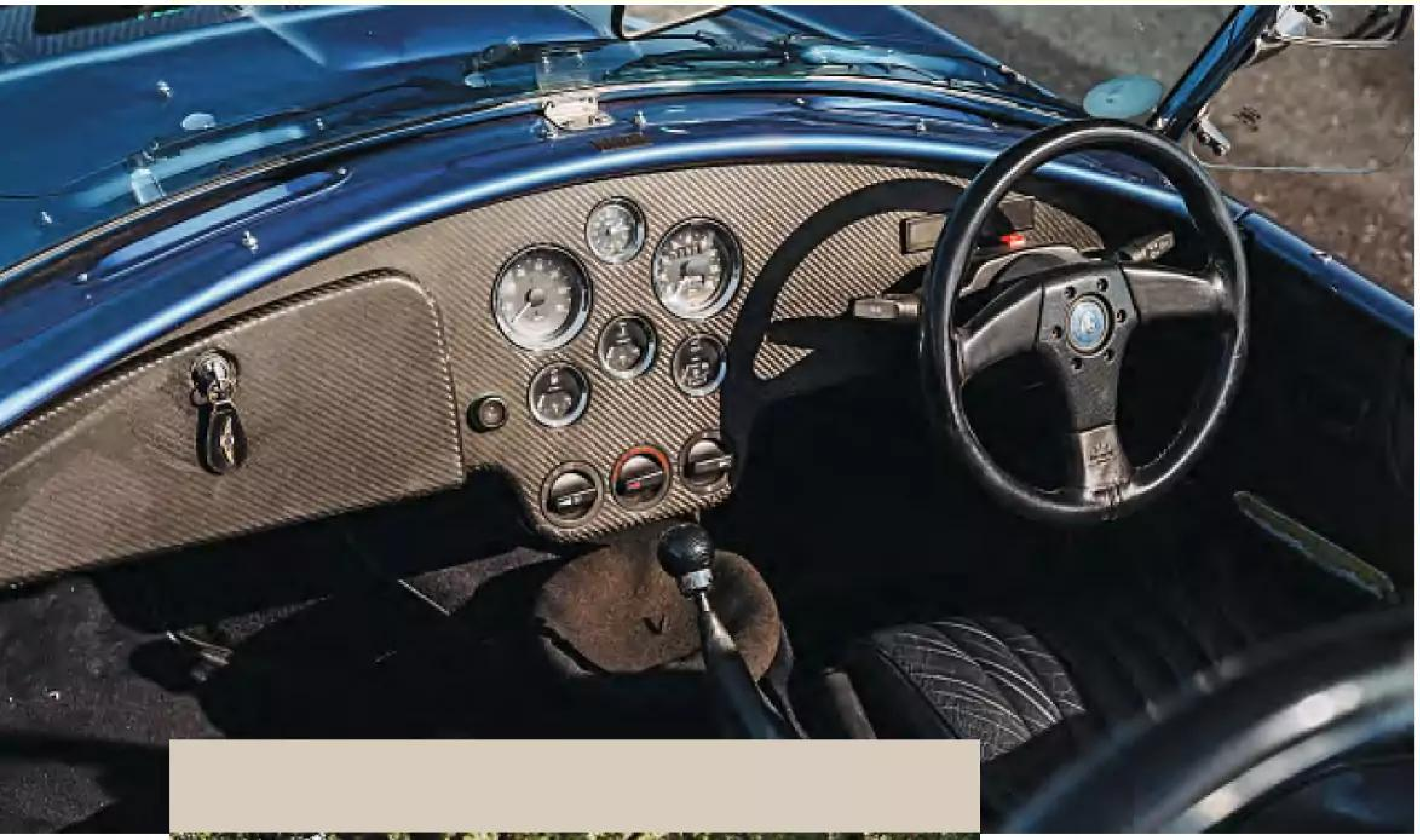
The real surprise is just how energetic this Cobra feels, despite its lower-power status; it pulls to 6000rpm with both enthusiasm and a generous enough turn of speed, and it's certainly capable of overstressing the chassis if you're keen enough with the throttle.

COBRA
POWERED BY FORD
Edelbrock

Lightweight feels like a better-tied-down MkIV, with greater precision, better brakes and, with 370bhp on tap, an eye-watering turn of speed

'The Lightweight's engine dominates. Speed and power delivery are relentless, and the V8 is eager to reach for the high notes'

Clockwise from main: CRS has a carbonfibre body, not aluminium; 5.0 V8 makes 225bhp; steering wheel feels on the chunky side



COBRA, BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT

The Autokraft Cobras enjoyed celebrity patronage, including by the Sultan of Brunei – whose car was at Redline during our visit. The Sultan ordered this right-hand-drive MkIV with an automatic gearbox as a special commission in 1995, plus two others as gifts.

While the idea of a two-pedal Cobra might seem rather at odds with this car's sporting ethos, if you're not too worried about setting lap times it pairs nicely with the MkIV's soft chassis and makes for quite an appealing Sunday cruiser.

The MkIV changes direction with much more verve than you might expect of a sports car with a heavy engine sitting in the nose, but then the V8 is pushed right back towards the bulkhead and the centre of gravity must be Cobra-low. The fundamentals are there, then, but the MkIV's comfort-focused suspension means a lot of mass to move and body roll to manage if you jab in two quick steering inputs: you need to keep one step ahead of the weight transfer to avoid a tank-slapper.

The MkIV is a characterful cruiser, but clearly there was room for a more focused and – crucially – more profitable model. Neil recalls: "MkIVs sold well, but Autokraft was still restoring original Cobras that were much more valuable. Brian wanted a model in between."

The result was the Lightweight, as engineered by Peter Duckett. Described by Neil as "essentially a detuned MkIII", the Lightweight was revealed at the 1990 Geneva motor show and is represented here by the blue example with the single chromed roll hoop.

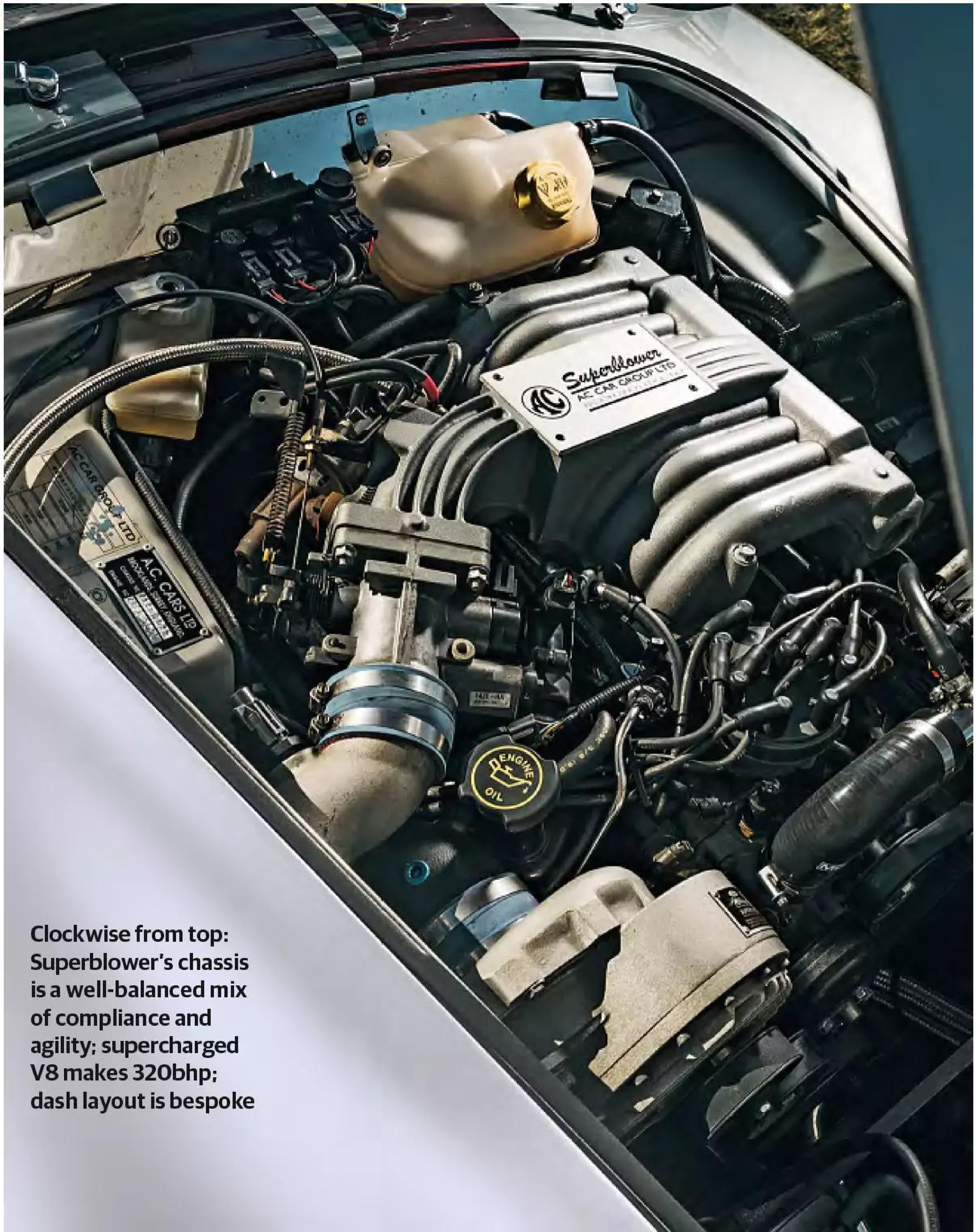
The weight dropped from 1190 to 1070kg (weight-loss measures extended to removing the door cards and using fabric door pulls), and power from the 302 engine shot up to 370bhp thanks to aluminium cylinder heads, a Holley four-barrel carb and catalyser-free exhausts. Peter shows me a picture of the Brooklands production line and points out a Lightweight chassis: the longitudinal tubes are blanked off at their ends rather than being open to accept impact bumpers. Along with the emissions, it's why the Lightweight wasn't Federalised for US sale, but today it's the most sought-after Autokraft model, representing a sizeable step in both dynamics and performance.

The engine dominates proceedings. Speed and power delivery are relentless, and the V8 is as eager to get going from just above idle as it is to reach for the high notes. There is a satisfyingly positive 'snick' to this car's gearchanges, so rowing up and down the 'box is more involving. But while the basic chassis behaviour is familiar from the MkIV, there's added finesse: the steering is more precise and suffers less kickback when you load up the front end, and, while it is still relatively soft, it's more controlled and happier with multiple direction changes. The brakes are fantastically strong and responsive, and even the traction is superior despite the rear tyres having to manage more power. There's more connection to the car which gives you the confidence to driving the Lightweight fast.

During the years after the Lightweight's introduction, AC developed the Brooklands Ace, a two-seater roadster with a Ford V8 and the look of a depressed, middle-aged Mazda MX-5. Peter describes it as "costing £150k or so to build but £50k to buy". It was doomed.

By 1996, receiver Price Waterhouse was in and Ford was out, taking the Cobra name with it, but there was salvation in the shape of new, South African owner Alan Lubinsky, who established the AC Car Group Ltd. "Lubinksy got the workforce together and asked how we

'You feel the kick to the performance and a real punch through to 6000rpm. It's a MkIV with a fast-forward button'



could improve the MkIV," says Neil. "We said Ford's 302 V8 was underpowered, especially as new performance cars were coming out, so he introduced the AC Superblower – in effect a supercharged Cobra without the name."

The Superblower needed to be Federalised to be profitable, so a 6lb supercharger was added to the Ford engine, giving 320bhp – not quite a match for the Lightweight but around 50% up on a MkIV. It cost £69,795 new in 1997.

The dashboard is different from those of the earlier examples, with the key dials grouped centrally in a semicircle, and warning lights and indicators arranged in a smaller, mirror-image shape ahead of the steering wheel. It's a simple yet beautifully crafted interior, with the burgundy leather and carpets set off by aluminium and painted-silver detailing.

Clockwise from top: Superblower's chassis is a well-balanced mix of compliance and agility; supercharged V8 makes 320bhp; dash layout is bespoke

'The pace of the CRS and MkIV would be generous by any normal standards, but it soon pales against the other two here'

Muscular arches and Halibrand wheels are signatures

The noise brims with attitude even if it isn't quite as boisterous as a Lightweight, yet the supercharger isn't immediately obvious: any whine is damped into the background, but the belt-driven forced induction keeps fizz in the throttle in a way a turbo can't. Breach 2000rpm, though, and there's a kick to the performance and real punch through to 6000rpm, by which point things are moving at a furious lick. It's like a MkIV with a fast-forward button.

This car's gearshift is a little more knuckly than the Lightweight's, but there's still a tight mechanical feel, fantastic brakes and a chassis that sits somewhere between the MkIV and Lightweight in its combination of softness and eagerness to turn. A Superblower also does a better job of putting its power down than the MkIV, something apparent both off the line and when you feed in the throttle during cornering. This is a nicely balanced package.

While the Superblower maximised both performance and profit, the CRS was all about accessibility. Launched in 1998 at the London Motor Show, the CRS – for Carbon Road Series – marks the biggest change in philosophy of all the cars here (blue again, this time identified by twin black roll hoops). "Lubinsky could see the big market for replicas," recalls Neil. "He wanted a car positioned below the MkIV to tap into that. To do it he had to reduce costs."

An alternative to the handbuilt aluminium body was key, and the solution was a MkIV chassis with a carbonfibre shell produced by Pro-Tech Motorsport (the outfit was affiliated with radio DJ David 'Kid' Jensen's F3000 team). Produced in two pieces, it weighed just 22kg and helped cut the price of the CRS to £38,000, or more typically the low-to-mid-40s with a few options, at a time when a replica was £35-40k.

This car is chassis number one, the original press demonstrator, and as such it features a few unusual details, including exhaust pipes that point down and a roll hoop that stands vertically, not slightly canted back. It was originally purchased by Bertie Gilbart-Smith, previously chairman of the AC Owners' Club. He has since passed ownership to his family, but remains best-placed to relay the history.

"I'm an AC person – I bought my Ace Bristol in 1965," he explains. "I loved that the CRS is so old in so many ways – the roof is just the same as that of my Ace Bristol – but I also loved the idea of carbonfibre, because back then it was the very latest material for a road car."

The CRS has since accompanied Bertie on many European road trips (in part because he

AC CAR GROUP AC CRS

Sold/number built 2000-'02/37
Construction steel ladder-frame chassis, carbonfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4942cc V8, with electronic fuel injection
Max power 225bhp @ 4200rpm
Max torque 300lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission Borg-Warner five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 6in (4150mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2619lb (1188kg)
0-60mph 5 secs
Top speed 145mph **Mpg** n/a
Price new £38,950

scrutineered for the Historic Grand Prix Cars Association) and has racked up an impressive 76,000 miles over the years.

The 5-litre/302cu in Ford V8 has comparable performance to the MkIV, at 225bhp, with its kerbweight of 1188kg similar, too. The biggest difference initially is the chunkier leather steering wheel, which has a mild damping effect on the messages percolating through to your hands from the front wheels. But mostly the handling and performance compare with the MkIV – performance that by any other standards would be judged as very generous, but which pales against the Lightweight and the Superblower. The chassis can still feel something of a handful if you chuck it around – the rear will edge into oversteer through a dry corner if you feed in the power early, and there's a fair amount of weight transfer to manage through direction changes, which is where you're far more likely to find yourself in trouble than by simply squeezing the throttle.

As a comfortable and characterful cruiser with a good turn of speed, there's much to enjoy here, especially because the CRS continues to be the most affordable of these cars.

Autokraft and the subsequent AC Car Group Ltd wasn't the end of the AC Cobra story. Over the years there has been a confusing number of AC-licensed products available, from Superformance in South Africa, AC Automotive in Germany and AC Heritage at Brooklands, the latter run by racer Steve Gray who now owns the original AC tooling. Then in 2020 AC Cars itself announced a new electric AC Cobra, and continued to sell a recreation Superblower with the GM LSA engine.

The saga only gets more convoluted with time, but these four ACs are a reminder of the simple appeal of a big American V8 in a little old British sports car. Whatever the origins, that's always a recipe for fun.

Thanks to the Gilbart-Smith family; Steve Mills, Redline Engineering UK (redlineclassiccars.co.uk)

AUTOKRAFT MkIV AC COBRA

Sold/number built 1982-'96/c450
Construction steel ladder-frame chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4942cc V8, four-barrel Holley carb or electronic fuel injection
Max power 225bhp @ 4200rpm
Max torque 300lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission Borg-Warner five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 6in (4150mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2620lb (1188kg)
0-60mph 5.3 secs
Top speed 135mph **Mpg** 16-23
Price new £45,000

AC CAR GROUP AC SUPERBLOWER

Sold/number built 1997-2001/28
Construction steel ladder-frame chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4942cc V8, with supercharger and electronic fuel injection
Max power 320bhp @ 5700rpm
Max torque 385lb ft @ 3750rpm
Transmission Borg-Warner five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 6in (4150mm) **Width** 5ft 8in (1727mm) **Height** 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2557lb (1160kg)
0-60mph 4.2 secs
Top speed 155mph **Mpg** n/a
Price new £69,795

AUTOKRAFT AC COBRA LIGHTWEIGHT

Sold/number built 1990-'96/73
Construction steel ladder-frame chassis, aluminium body
Engine iron-block, alloy-heads, ohv 4942cc V8, Holley four-barrel carburettor
Max power 370bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 390lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission Borg-Warner five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 6in (4150mm) **Width** 5ft 8in (1727mm) **Height** 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2359lb (1070kg)
0-60mph 4.6 secs
Top speed 140mph **Mpg** 16-23
Price new £110,000

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Gamekeeper turned poacher

When a traffic cop set eyes on a speeding Shelby GT350, little did he know that it would lead to a long-lasting love affair. This is the story of an enduring relationship

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY **MICK WALSH**

SPX 722

To reduce production costs, the '66 interior featured a rev counter mounted in a dash-top pod

Indoctrinations to a favourite car don't come much more dramatic than that of Greg Barriera, a retired Californian policeman who has owned his Shelby GT350 for more than three decades. Imagine the early morning scene on the famous Pacific Coast Highway in 1978: a patrolman is patiently watching the horizon for fast cars when a hard-driven Mustang appears, its driver gunning the small-block V8 until he spots the police sedan.

"I was doing radar speed checks on a 30mph zone near Santa Monica when this cool car comes blasting into sight doing 80mph," recalls Greg. "I was a young cop, and determined to stop it. The Wimbledon White Mustang pulls up, and a guy with long hair and a beard winds down the window. I was much more interested in the car than giving him a ticket, and we soon got chatting. I knew from that moment that I had to have a GT350. The owner was Steve Beck, who'd bought his Mustang, 5S258, in 1974 for $900 and still owns it today. We became good friends and still go to club events together, as well as for drives on favourite roads."

Greg was raised a Ford fan because his father had always been loyal to the Blue Oval. He says: "I bought my first car, a '57 Fairlane retractable, when I was 14 years old. My dad put me behind the wheel and towed me home. Over the next two years we rebuilt it, and as soon as I could drive, I was out on Van Nuys for cruise nights. I must have a done a pretty good job restoring it, because a pair of Canadian firemen offered me $2500. I traded up to a Galaxie 406 and have been into high-performance Fords ever since."

The experience with the speeding GT350 started Greg looking for a Shelby in earnest. "In 1981 this young recruit, Matt, turned up with a white '66 GT350 that he'd inherited from his brother, and I had to have it," says Greg. "It was his only transport, so I'd see the car parked at work all the time, which really increased my desire. I'd also see it on the street when passing his house on the route home, and I kept leaving notes asking him to sell it. His brother had loved the car and took it to the first Shelby American Automobile Club events, but he died of leukaemia and the young police officer took over the Mustang. Those family connections were tough to break, but Matt gave in after six months – I think it was to stop me bothering him. I went straight to the Credit Union and drew out the $7000 asking price."

Once the car was in his hands, Greg started researching the GT350's history. "It was sold new by Hayward Ford near San Francisco," he continues. "It was one of the first dealer teams to race the GT350 and, driven by Dick Carter, had great success on the West Coast. My car, 6S1802, was originally blue and was fitted early on in its life with an aftermarket Paxton supercharger by Maier Racing in the Bay area, where the first owner, a Mr Brabant, had it serviced. The Ford had certainly been enjoyed. When I bought it in 1981, it had already been around the clock once. I've seen it pass twice and it's now done about 350,000 miles. I like cars that have had a life – these low-mileage GT350s that make crazy money at auction are to me like a cheerleader who's never seen the inside of a boys' locker room."

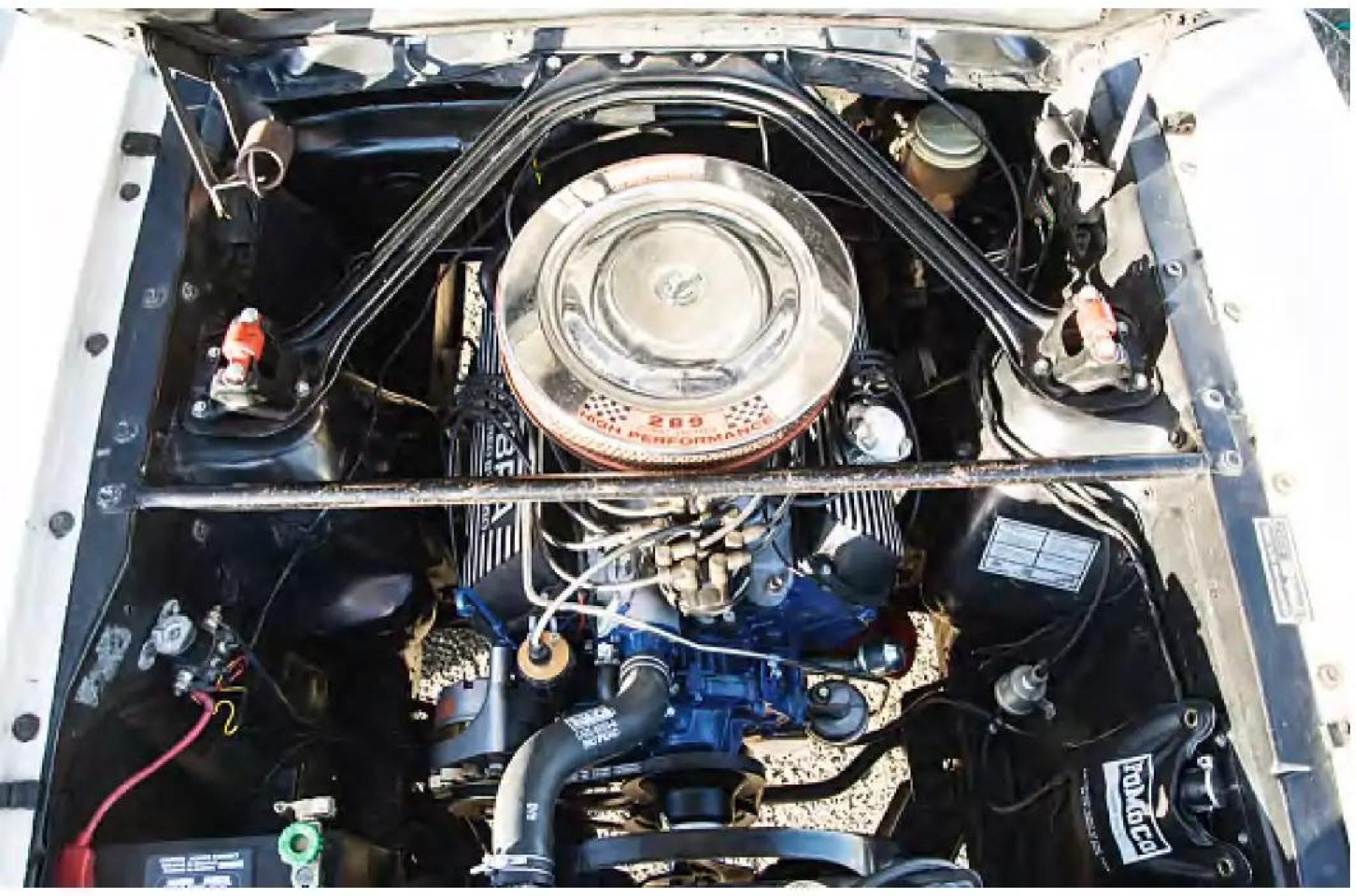
Living in the Santa Monica area, Greg was close to the Shelby factory at 6501 West Imperial Highway – adjacent to LAX airport – where the GT350s were built, as well as a wealth of specialists. "I stuck with the blower for years, and used to take it to Granatelli Motor Sports just up Highway One in Oxnard," he says. "I became good friends with Andy Granatelli and got special service out of the back door. They were doing supercharger work for the military and developed this special green racing fluid, which they let me have for my car.

"The blower added a lot of power and low-down torque, but it was a pain to keep in tune with the carburettor. When I fitted a wilder Eagle cam during an engine rebuild, Andy told me that it wouldn't suit the supercharger. But I didn't listen. After several years, I took off the blower. I've been through a few 289 Hi-Po engines because I love driving hard. For 25 years, the GT350 was my daily transport – I even took my pregnant wife to the hospital in it. The Ford has become part of the family, and now my son drives it."

Early in his ownership, Greg joined the local SAAC group and became friends with Alan Bolte, a British Shelby enthusiast who had owned his ex-Tasca Ford GT350R since 1979. He says: "Alan talked me into joining the Cobra guys at Willow Springs for a test day. After a few laps, my stock Shelby was outgunned by all of the racers – it quickly overheated and the handling just wasn't there. From that day, I started modifying it. We built a hot engine, lowered the suspension, changed the spring rates and fitted a glassfibre front apron to make it closer to an R model. And, of course, it ran American Racing mag wheels."

SPX 722
HAYWARD FORD

Wheels, rear quarter windows, side scoops and stripes were designed by Cobra legend Peter Brock. Left: 289 Hi-Po V8 – Monte Carlo bar helped to stiffen the front end. Below left: grille was revised for '66



The memories of the GT350 are endless and, despite its modified tune for track use, Greg continued to drive it in to work at the police station. "The highlight of every morning commute was a fast run down Topanga Canyon on State Route 27," he recalls. "It's a great road through the Santa Monica Mountains to the Pacific Coast Highway. We started to time the run and got more competitive with faster and faster times. With no silencers and '65-style side-pipes exiting ahead of the rear wheels, the car was really noisy. Then one morning we reached the highway and there was a police roadblock. The officer was fuming: 'Do you know how long we've been looking for you?' he ranted. There had been endless complaints about speed and noise, and we promised never to do it again. The Mustang was parked up for a while, but we started doing the same thing with a little five-speed Datsun 1200."

The GT350's motoring highlights continued, with eagerly anticipated trips to Willow Springs twice a year. Special events included runs up to Monterey for Shelby conventions and the tribute Ford years at the Laguna Seca historics. It now seems that every GT350 and Cobra has been signed by Shelby, but the faded signatures inside the bootlid from the famous Texan and Shelby American racer/manager Lew Spencer date back to '81. "No one else thought of doing it back then," says Greg.

Over the years, the Ford's owner has been very involved with the local branch of the SAAC, including as its president from 1990. "One of the privileges is that you get to meet many of the key folk who were involved with developing the GT350, such as Chuck Cantwell," he says. "He was Shelby's project manager and worked closely with Ken Miles on the Mustang programme. They spent a lot of time together at Willow Springs, and Chuck told us some great stories about scary flights when Ken borrowed Shelby's Cessna."

In 2009, Cantwell decided it was time to finally buy a GT350, as Greg remembers: "It was his first one because he could drive as many as he wanted when working for the factory. The Shelby community was fantastic, helping him to restore his '66 car, 6S796, and specialists would just send him parts without an invoice. If it weren't for Chuck, we probably wouldn't have had a 50th anniversary to celebrate. Everyone appreciated that."

Meeting Peter Brock, who gave the GT350 its signature style – he designed the Le Mans

SHELBY GT350

Sold/number built 1965-'66/2378
Construction steel ladder chassis, steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 4727cc V8, single Holley four-barrel carburettor
Max power 306bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 329lb ft @ 4200rpm
Transmission four-speed Borg-Warner manual or three-speed Cruise-O-Matic, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs; telescopic dampers f/r **Steering** recirculating ball
Brakes discs front/drums rear
Length 15ft 6in (4724mm)
Height 4ft 3½in (1308mm)
Width 5ft 8¼in (1734mm)
Weight 2925lb (1327kg)
Top speed 127mph
0-60mph 6.2 secs **Mpg** 12
Price new $4428

“Jay Leno once said: ‘You sell your stocks, but you never sell your Shelby Mustang’”

NARROW BRIDGE
SPX 172
HAYWARD FORD

Clockwise: the Mustang roaring across the Salinas River as Greg heads home from the GT350 celebrations at Monterey; lurking in the shadows at Moss Landing; underbonnet sticker is full of promise

289 CUBIC INCHES
HIGH PERFORMANCE

stripes (inspired by the Cunningham team), the wheels, the dashboard modifications, the side graphics and the brake scoops – was another honour. “Pete is such a cool guy, and always claims the ’66 GT350 is his favourite Shelby,” says Greg. He has a real appreciation of history and has regularly made trips down to the old factory, as well as to 1042 Princeton Drive in Venice, where it all started: “When we run at Willow Springs, you can’t help thinking about the historic connection, because all the development driving was done there by Miles.”

Given the choice between a ’65 and ’66 GT350, Greg is happy with his later example, saying: “The early models were pretty basic race cars as Shelby pushed to get homologation for Ford, but for 1966 they’d sorted the bugs and it became a more refined road car. The values have rocketed, with collectors paying silly prices for rare ones. There was a small batch of 252 ’65 models that was carried over to ’66 because Shelby was worried about supply, and these now make a bundle, but you can still buy a tidy ’66 model for half as much, while low-mileage, matching-numbers survivors are a little pricier. For the four special GT350 convertibles built at the end of ’66, you can name your price. In my book, the first two years are the only true Shelby Mustangs. In later years, he’d do anything to make a buck.”

In 2014, Greg made the decision to revert 6S1802 to a more civilised road car. “The early aluminium transmissions are horrible,” he admits. “They pop out of gear and the synchros are weak, so I’ve kept the four-speed TopLoader. Best of all, you can pick them up for peanuts. The car still has its original brakes, and the Detroit Locker still knocks you around. We built a fresh 289 V8, but I kept the heater out because I never liked the heavy design and the hoses are really ugly. We also put the sound-deadening back. She tips the scales at 2925lb – but that’s still light for a ’66 car.

“As you get older, your tastes change. Noise is just noise and doesn’t make you go faster, so we have now reinstated the full-length exhaust, which is a little more refined. I also have a 2013 Boss 302; it is great, but, unlike the older car, you just don’t feel as connected with it. In the Shelby, I can tell when the front end is pushing out or the tail is breaking away; with the modern Mustang, you’re just along for the ride. Jay Leno once said: ‘You sell your stocks, but you never sell your Shelby.’ There are a few long-term owners in the Los Angeles region who agree with that.”

Although the car was originally Sapphire Blue, Greg has retained the later Wimbledon White finish. “It’s the same paint from 1978, when Matt’s friends talked him into changing it, claiming that no GT350s were ever blue,” he explains. “I’ve never had an accident and the only time that it’s been tapped was when my wife was driving. I was in another Shelby and she was following in my car. She wasn’t used to the brakes and ran into the back of me!”

As an ex-policeman, Greg is critical of modern driving standards – particularly the use of mobile phones – and doesn’t enjoy running the Ford as much as he once did, although he still takes it out every two weeks. “The highlight of the year is Super Bowl Sunday in early February,” he says. “The roads are empty and I go up to the Lake Hughes area with a group of friends. Steve [the speeder who prompted the GT350 passion] brings his car and we have a great time on the canyon roads.”

These days, Greg likes nothing more than working on his cars. “We have a small ranch up in the mountains,” he says with a smile. “My wife loves horses, and I have a building where I play with Mustangs.” That sounds like a dream retirement to me.

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HAIL TO THE KING

Between 1964 and '68, Carroll Shelby elevated Ford's best-selling Mustang into the 'King of the Road'. A lap of the old Spa circuit proves it's still worthy of the crown

WORDS **CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD/SERGE CORDEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **DAVID NOELS**

COBRA JET
GT500 KR

This GT500 KR's gentle patina is as much an asset as its inside-and-out originality; transmission wants for a fifth

'This Cobra Jet V8, revised by Carroll Shelby's team in 1968, certainly knows how to make itself heard'

Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium, and the highest point of one of the most famous and awe-inspiring race tracks on the planet. At the end of the Kemmel Straight, Porsches turn and pass by on the hallowed Tarmac having climbed the steep slope of Eau Rouge, exited Raidillon and torn down the long straight. The cars tumble through Kemmel before braking hard to plunge into the chicane and Les Combes. A few decades ago this chicane didn't even exist; instead, the drivers continued on and arced left, at full speed, to dive into the 14.1km – 8.75 miles – of the old circuit from this spot where we sit, with hands on the steering wheel of an American automotive icon: a Shelby GT500 KR.

With a quarter-turn of the key, the mighty Cobra Jet V8 snorts into its cavernous rumble, all seven litres of it, with a four-barrel Holley 735cfm carb providing a carefully metered supply of fuel and fresh air. The engine, revised and corrected by Carroll Shelby's team in 1968, certainly knows how to make itself heard.

This particular GT500 KR – the last two letters announcing to all that it is the 'King of the Road' – spent a large proportion of its life back home in the USA, basking under the Californian sun. Completely original, even down to the paint, it presents the passage of time in the form of discreet cracks and blemishes. To fix them or to treat this car to a new livery would lose one of its greatest assets: its unique patina.

The interior is also in factory condition, with black seats that combine leather and vinyl, padded steering wheel and wood-effect dash representing the most luxurious standards of Ford production at the time. On the glovebox, in bright white ink, is the signature of Shelby himself – an addition no doubt coaxed from the brilliant Texan by a previous owner.

The original Mustang was launched on 17 April 1964, and it became such a success that Ford's US showrooms were overwhelmed by crowds. And the orders followed: 25,000 at the end of the first day, 400,000 by 31 December and a million examples produced by February 1966. Ford's modest target for the first year had been to build just 100,000 Mustangs.

The first 'pony car' lacked power, though, so Lee Iacocca, the father of the project, turned to Shelby to try to counter the competition's recently launched muscle cars, such as the Pontiac GTO and Plymouth Barracuda. But when Iacocca called the former Le Mans winner in 1964 to ask him to develop a competition version of the new Mustang, the no-nonsense Shelby uttered the immortal line: "Lee, I can't turn a mule into a racehorse!"

Despite his protestations, Shelby's team got to work lightening the bodywork and modifying the car's suspension and brakes. Importantly, he also increased the power of the 289cu in V8 that was already being used in the Cobra from around 270bhp to a more useful 306bhp. The rear bench was deleted to turn the GT350 into a two-seater, which was vital to comply with competition regulations: the objective was to produce the 100 minimum units necessary for homologation in the B Production category of the Sports Car Club of America Championship. That goal was soon surpassed and left behind as a distant milestone, with a total of 561 units produced, including 36 GT350R – for Race – versions.

On its first outing, fittingly in Texas at Green Valley Raceway on Valentine's Day 1965, the GT350R, driven by British ace Ken Miles, took a B Production class victory. Fast-forward to July 2020 and, hot on the heels of Miles' surprise stardom in Hollywood's *Le Mans '66*, that same car – chassis 5R002 – sold at auction for a record £3million, £400,000 more than the sum paid for the *Bullitt* Mustang six months earlier.

The Shelby GT350 had seen the light of day just a few weeks before Miles' famous win, on 27 January, and was notably significantly sportier than the stock coupe, with harnesses, a stripped specialised dashboard, a strut-brace, Koni shock absorbers and a lighter, close-ratio Borg-Warner T-10 transmission. But it was soon watered down, with the side-exit exhausts ditched in favour of conventional rear pipes, and even the option of a back seat returned from 1966. More colours were added to the original Wimbledon White, too, and the front suspension was raised and the rear simplified, while an automatic option was offered. Yet beneath the glassfibre bonnet remained the high-compression 306bhp V8, with its intake manifold borrowed from the Cobra.

The 1967 model-year Ford Mustang far from pleased Shelby, who found it much too heavy and bulky. His team added large air intakes to the bonnet and the body sides, two long-range spotlights on the nose, a thinner grille and a small spoiler at the rear. Front and rear valances joined the bonnet in glassfibre to shed more weight. Naturally, Shelby took the opportunity to create a more powerful version: the GT500, with the 360bhp big-block 428cu in V8 – an engine that also powered the Ford Interceptors of the police fleets.

The Shelby range continued into 1968 in line with the previous year. Aesthetic changes were limited largely to the rectangular driving lights, tail-lights lifted from the Thunderbird and the appearance of a convertible version, although the cars were renamed Shelby Cobra GT350 and GT500. The Cobra Jet V8 fitted to the King of the Road, based on the 428 Interceptor unit, received further modifications to make it yet more sporty, having originally been devised in no small part by Bob Tasca, a racing driver and the Ford distributor on Rhode Island. His ingenuity combined the 428 with components from other Ford powerplants, such as cylinder heads from the 427, plus a new oil pump, distributor and aluminium intake manifold. He reportedly drove to Dearborn, Michigan, and beat the best the factory could offer, at which point Ford analysed his handiwork. In return, the racer took home a GT40 engine and 10 KRs were later sent to his dealership; he kept the best two for the drag strip.

SHELBY
2-ZZA 859

Distinctive 'nostrils' are visible in the raised bonnet profile. Above: often-copied twin central stripes were a Shelby signature and wrap the length of the car

K-CODE A 'K' as the fifth letter in the serial number stamped in the left front inner wing of a first-gen (1964-'66) Mustang indicates the 'Hi-Po' 271bhp version of the 289 Windsor small-block, as used in the AC Cobra. That's almost 50bhp stronger than the A-code 225bhp four-barrel unit. When transplanted into a lightweight, short-wheelbase British sports car it made the TVR Griffith very entertaining, too.

SHELBY GT350 The original '65 pumped up the Mustang into something suitable to bear the Shelby name, only to be toned down a notch for '66 (above) – some Hertz 'Rent-A-Racers' even had auto 'boxes. But for the leanest experience the GT350R is the lightest and most muscular, allegedly with 350bhp; the most obvious visual clue is the much-copied bulbous front apron with gaping-maw air intake. Only 36 were built, since massively replicated. And dead cool.

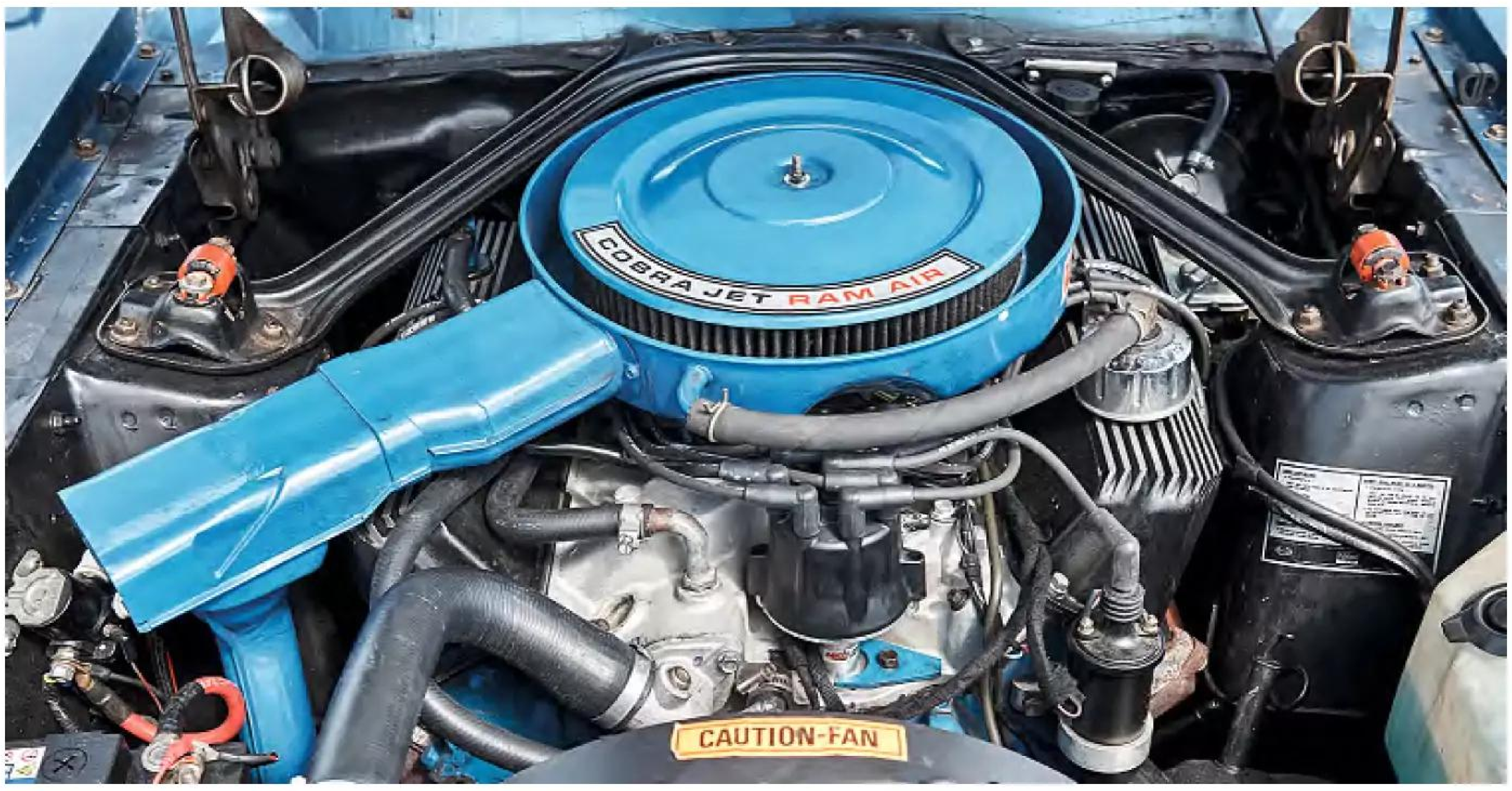
390 GT Ah the S-code '67, as immortalised by Steve McQueen (or mostly his mate, Bud Ekins) in *Bullitt*, the most powerful of the first-facelift (and slightly lardier) Mustangs, with a 320bhp FE 390 (6.4-litre) big-block. The GT option is little more than a trim package of foglights, twin pipes, styled wheels and quarter-panel emblems. The thinking person's choice might be a regular 'tinsel' S-code, without the trimmings. Or the seven-speed 'box...

THE OTHER HOT MUSTANGS *(and not just Shelbys)*

BOSS 302 The '69s got even larger and heavier, but this homologation special for Trans-Am racing went some way to hardening up the image. It was to go up against the Camaros left behind at General Motors by recent defectors to Ford Semon 'Bunkie' Knudsen (management muscle) and Larry Shinoda (styling), who, when asked, said the new secret project he was working on was "the boss's car". Its spec gives a clue that it was built to rev: the 290bhp 'Hi-Po' 302 motor, just under Trans-Am's 305cu in (5-litre) limit, used new Cleveland-type heads housing bigger valves, plus solid lifters, riding in a lowered package with a four-speed manual 'box.

BOSS 429 Now things are getting silly. Like the 302, the mightiest classic-era Mustang is a homologation special, this time to qualify the 429 'semi-hemi' thin-wall V8 for NASCAR; at least 500 had to be sold in road trim, officially making 375bhp. Just 1359 were built from 1969-'70, partly because the inner wings needed tin-bashing by Kar Kraft to accommodate the massive unit's aluminium heads.

COBRA II The Pinto-based Mustang II of 1974 puts the proper ponies into perspective – let's not even get into the later 'Fox' cars. Even worse, it was grandfathered by Lee Iacocca, who had conceived the original. In its final year, 1978, the top 5-litre version risibly bore the name 'King Cobra', but its 140bhp V8 struggled under a Spanish galleon's-worth of add-ons. This was Ford's idea of a Z-car rival. RIP good Mustangs. **Paul Hardiman**



Ford claimed 335bhp for the 428cu in V8, but that was smoke and mirrors – 400bhp-plus is nearer to the truth

From the middle of 1968 the updated engine found its way into a production version of the Shelby Cobra GT500 KR, which was the most powerful Mustang on sale at the time, officially rated at 335bhp but unofficially said to be good for around 400bhp. By lowering the quoted power output, the manufacturer was limiting the fee imposed by the National Hot Rod Association for the use of the engine in competition; it also reduced the insurance premiums. The addition of 'Cobra' to the name was a reference to its V8 Cobra Jet 428 engine, while 'King of the Road' was nabbed by Shelby before General Motors associated it with the Corvette – a clear shot across the bows in the war that was then raging between the Big Three American manufacturers. With no trademark listed, Ford and Shelby hurried to set the branding in motion and gazump Chevrolet.

If you're used to lazy, auto-equipped muscle cars, the Shelby Cobra GT500 KR's large, angled gearlever appears a little incongruous at first glance. But once you're in place behind the big two-spoke wheel it turns out to be sited perfectly. As we pull on to the old Spa circuit, now little more than a back-road through the Belgian Ardennes, a real toboggan ride of several kilometres opens up. The GT500 KR's steering is heavy at low speeds but soon lightens as you power away from Les Combes, down the rapid descent towards Burnenville and its long right-hander, then a slight curve to the left before tackling the turn at Malmedy. The Shelby absorbs the seemingly endless bend, then devours the straight towards Masta and the fast, fearsome and famous kink with houses butting right up to the side of the road.

Today we're sticking within the legal limits, but it's impossible not to think of the crazy velocities that the Formula One heroes reached around this circuit until 1970, after which the original layout was deemed too dangerous for the world's fastest single-seaters. Sports-prototypes continued to brave 'old Spa' until it closed for good in 1978. Henri Pescarolo set the outright track record in 1973, driving a Matra MS670B and posting an average speed of 262.461kph – 163mph – as he lapped the full loop in an astonishing and frankly quite terrifying 3 minutes and 13 seconds.

The bend at Stavelot signals the end of several kilometres downhill from Les Combes. The road starts to rise back towards the modern circuit, with a steep slope to the left, a ravine to the right and forest surrounding us. The longer stretches offer plenty of opportunity to deploy that unofficial 400bhp, but mainly it is the sensational 440lb ft that dominates. The noise grows exponentially from the low, burbling idle, and you quickly find yourself looking for a fifth gear that doesn't exist. On the brakes at the end of the climb, a gate appears just before Blanchimont and we're back to the present.

With only 1053 examples built, split near as dammit down the middle between coupes and convertibles, the Shelby Cobra GT500 KR remains for many the ultimate Mustang, perhaps even Carroll Shelby's ultimate creation. It also signalled the beginning of the end, because from the close of 1968 Semon E Knudsen, president of Ford at Dearborn, pushed the Mustang overweight and Shelby to the wings. Heavy – weighing some 400kg more than the GT350 – and with dynamics sidelined for comfort, the Shelby became a shadow of its former self then disappeared from the line-up for good by 1970.

It wasn't until 2007 that the great name once again appeared on a Ford Mustang, but none before it or since ever owned the road quite like the King.

Thanks to *Gentleman Car (gentlemancar.com)*

Carroll Shelby

SHELBY COBRA

Clockwise, from left: the steering is heavy, but only at first; cabin trim represents the height of Ford's late-'60s luxury; the man himself has left his mark

ROAD

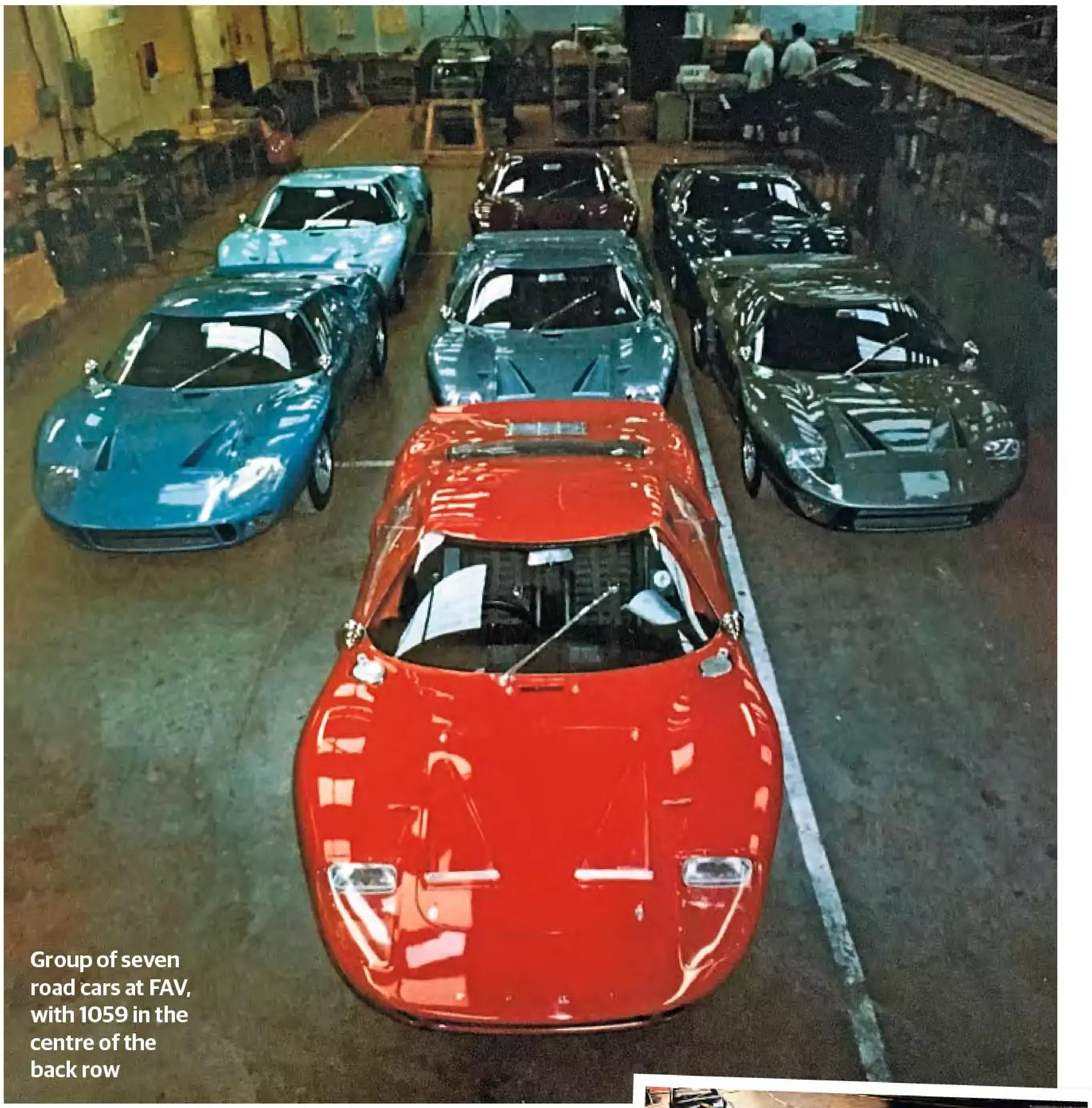
RACER

Shy and retiring types need not apply. If you're going to drive a Ford GT40 on the public road, you need to be prepared for everyone to stop and stare, for passengers in nearby cars to take photographs, for drivers of hot Subaru Imprezas to pull alongside at traffic lights and rev their engines encouragingly. You also need to be aware that, such is the car's lack of height, you do not appear in people's rear-view mirrors if you're directly behind them. They can hear you, certainly, but they can't see you.

The experience is not for the faint of heart, but there's a very good reason why we're in among the modern traffic on the A4 near Slough. As unlikely as it now seems, in the 1960s and '70s the town perhaps best known for Betjeman and Brent was motorsport central. Lola, Surtees, Frank Williams and Winkelmann Racing were all based here at various times, while story has it Jochen Rindt would come off the M4 at junction seven and routinely powerslide his way around the 270° slip-road.

But we are here because it was also home to Ford Advanced Vehicles, where 'our' GT40, chassis 1059, was built in November 1966. It was then shipped over to the USA on 23 December along with six other road cars and assigned to Shelby American for a promotional programme. For that reason, it was repainted white with blue stripes.

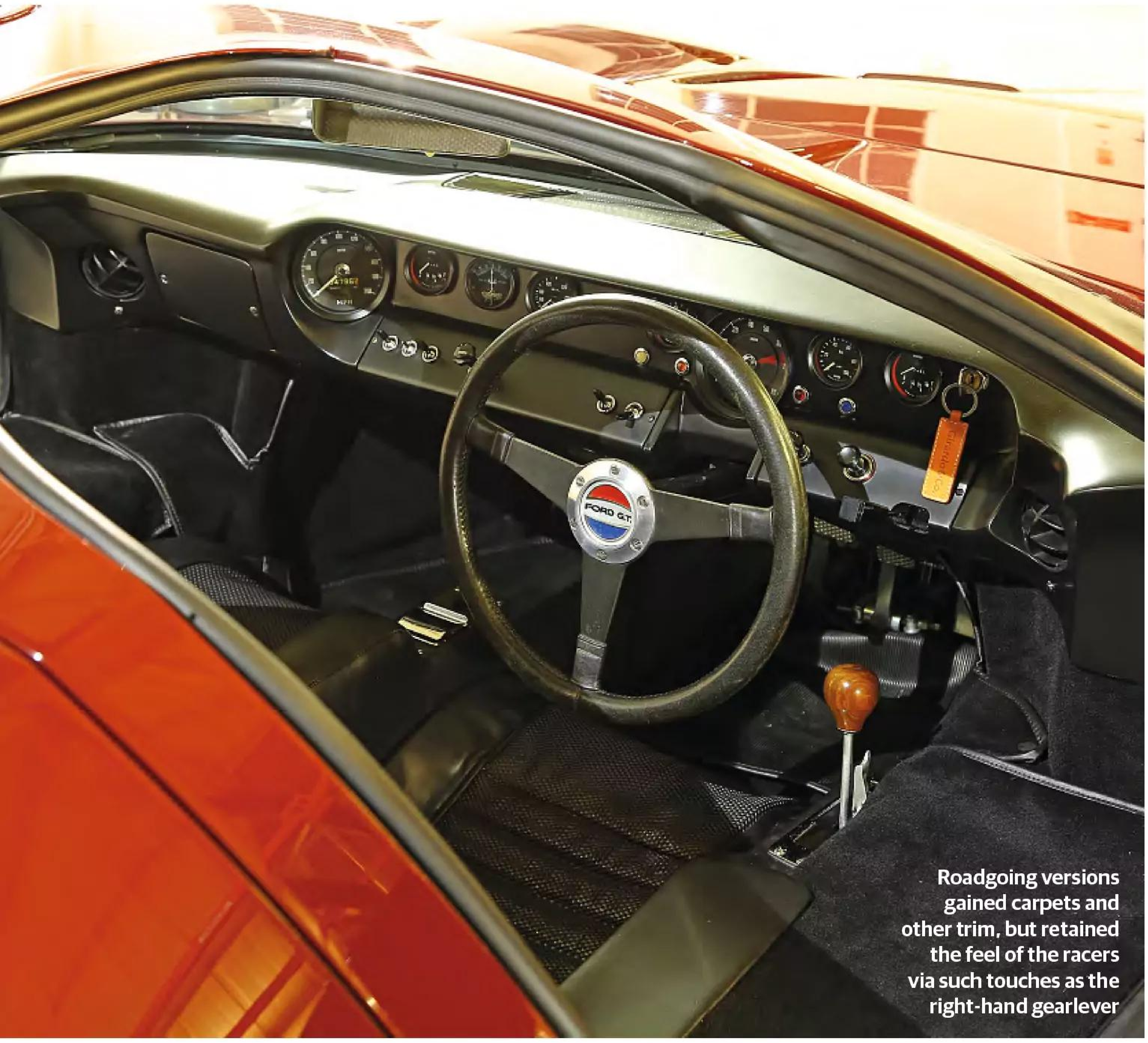
In September 1967 it was sold to the wonderfully titled Stark Hickey Ford Inc, owned by Edward J Schoenherr. In 1973, it



Group of seven road cars at FAV, with 1059 in the centre of the back row

Would you let your daughter marry a Ford owner?

GT40 has plenty of grip and little body roll. Inset: Epping Motor Co's car in Ford advertisement



Roadgoing versions gained carpets and other trim, but retained the feel of the racers via such touches as the right-hand gearlever

passed through the hands of Herbert Wetanson – who owned six over the years – before ending up with Dr Jack Frost in Iowa. Although Dr Frost used the car sparingly, he did replace the original, bladder-type fuel tanks with aluminium items made by none other than former JWA guru John Horsman.

Frost advertised it in 1990 – '1966 Ford GT40 2-door. 4mpg/200mph; interesting trades or a bunch of cash considered' – but kept it until his death in 2003. It was bought by a European collector in 2012 and fully restored, during which it was finally returned to its original shade of opalescent maroon with black leather.

It now looks nothing short of sensational. Open the door, however, and you're presented with the challenge of getting in. If you're tall, it's not a graceful procedure. If you're short, you can get away with stepping over the sill and placing your left foot on the seat, then swinging your right leg in – careful not to catch the gearlever – and straight under the surprisingly large steering wheel. At the same time, you slide your left leg down and drop into the seat.

Thanks to the reclined driving position and the fact that you're sitting almost on the road itself, straight away you feel like a racing driver. Actually, you get the same feeling just from sitting on the sill section, which is suitably wide because it both bolsters rigidity and houses the fuel tanks each side. You can picture yourself as Chris Amon, chatting things over with Bruce McLaren during practice at Le Mans.

But the impression is heightened inside. The low, wide dashboard features a 200mph speedometer on the far left and a rev counter – redlined at 6500rpm – directly in front of you. In between and to the far right are the other instruments, plus a selection of unlabelled toggle switches. Turn the key, prod the starter down on the central tunnel and, with a touch of throttle, the V8 bursts into life just behind your shoulders.

The five-speed gearbox features a dog-leg first, with a lockout for reverse just above it, and a narrow gate. Let out the heavy clutch and the GT40 pulls itself away, growling into the traffic. After only a few hundred yards, you're aware that your back is getting very warm – not a huge surprise – and all you can really see in the rear-view mirror are the eight carburettor intake trumpets.

First gear is good for the best part of 60mph, and even in so-called road spec its manners are undeniably those of a racing car. The ride is predictably firm, the steering is direct, and none of the feedback is dulled in the slightest. Which is perhaps to be expected when all FAV really did to sanitise the MkI was fit some interior trim, then add door locks, sill badges and Ford lettering on the nose. Gone were the racer's ventilated seats, though, and the battery was moved from the 'passenger compartment' back into the engine bay.

As Ronald 'Steady' Barker put it in an *Autocar* feature in which he was chauffeured by Innes Ireland, 'It would be irrational to describe the "street" GT40 as being the ideal touring car,' but that didn't mean there was any shortage of takers. In 1968, Rodney Lyons, who still runs

SUPERCAR ON A ROAD CAR TEST

It was more than five decades ago, but for me it could have been yesterday. In 1968 the GT40 was one of the world's great endurance racing cars, with two further Le Mans victories still to come. I was the 23-year-old junior reporter on *Autosport* who took the phone call: a man in Essex was looking for some exposure for the three GT40s he had for sale. One red, one yellow, one green, and all street-legal: would I like to drive one for the afternoon?

It was pouring with rain, of course. I set off in the yellow one, thinking it would be more visible in the murk, but it ran out of petrol 100 yards up the road. No problem: take one of the others. With the single wiper dancing across the misty 'screen and trucks and buses towering above me, I set off down Ilford High Street. I wrote: 'People stood stock-still on zebra crossings and stared in open-mouthed amazement. Lorry drivers leant down from their cabs and offered to swap. Schoolboys jumped off the pavement with delight and waved.'

Once on the A12, I felt brave enough to prod the long-travel throttle a bit further. The five-speed ZF gearbox was geared for 60mph in bottom and 95 in second. On this greasy road I discovered that, with racing tyres front and rear, grip was in short supply.

I was completely unqualified to evaluate this electrifying machine, but, striving to include some additional technical detail, I noted that 'above the exhaust's glorious music one can clearly hear the clatter of the floating brake calipers and the gobble of the fuel pumps'. And I commented favourably on the estimated fuel consumption of 17mpg – petrol was then 15 bob a gallon, or 16p a litre.

At that stage of my life it was far and away the most dramatic motor car I had ever driven, and predictably I headed my piece 'A Street Car Named Desire'. **Simon Taylor**

ALES
XBH 764F

Taylor negotiates wet Ilford High Street the Epping Motor Company, found homes for three. Chassis numbers 1025, 1030 and 1035 came to him as a job-lot. Originally intended for Shelby in the USA, they had been returned to the UK, converted to 'semi-road' spec and used by Shell for a promotional film.

"They actually had four cars," he remembers. "An agent was selling them, and I had three because the last one was a bit rough. The guy was upset that I wouldn't take all of them.

"I spoke to my bank manager and said that I needed some money to buy new stock. He said 'fine' and asked what the cars were. I replied that they were three Fords. 'They seem a bit dear,' he said. 'I'd like to have a look at them.' So when I got them, I took one round to the bank. He came outside, looked at the car, then looked at me and said: 'I hope you know what you're doing!'

"Somebody up in Yorkshire bought one on hire purchase. He took it on a Friday, raced it on the Saturday and did the clutch in, then I got a phone call on the Monday. He couldn't really afford it, and I ended up taking the car back. He gave me a couple of hundred quid to fix the clutch, which only cost £75 in the end."

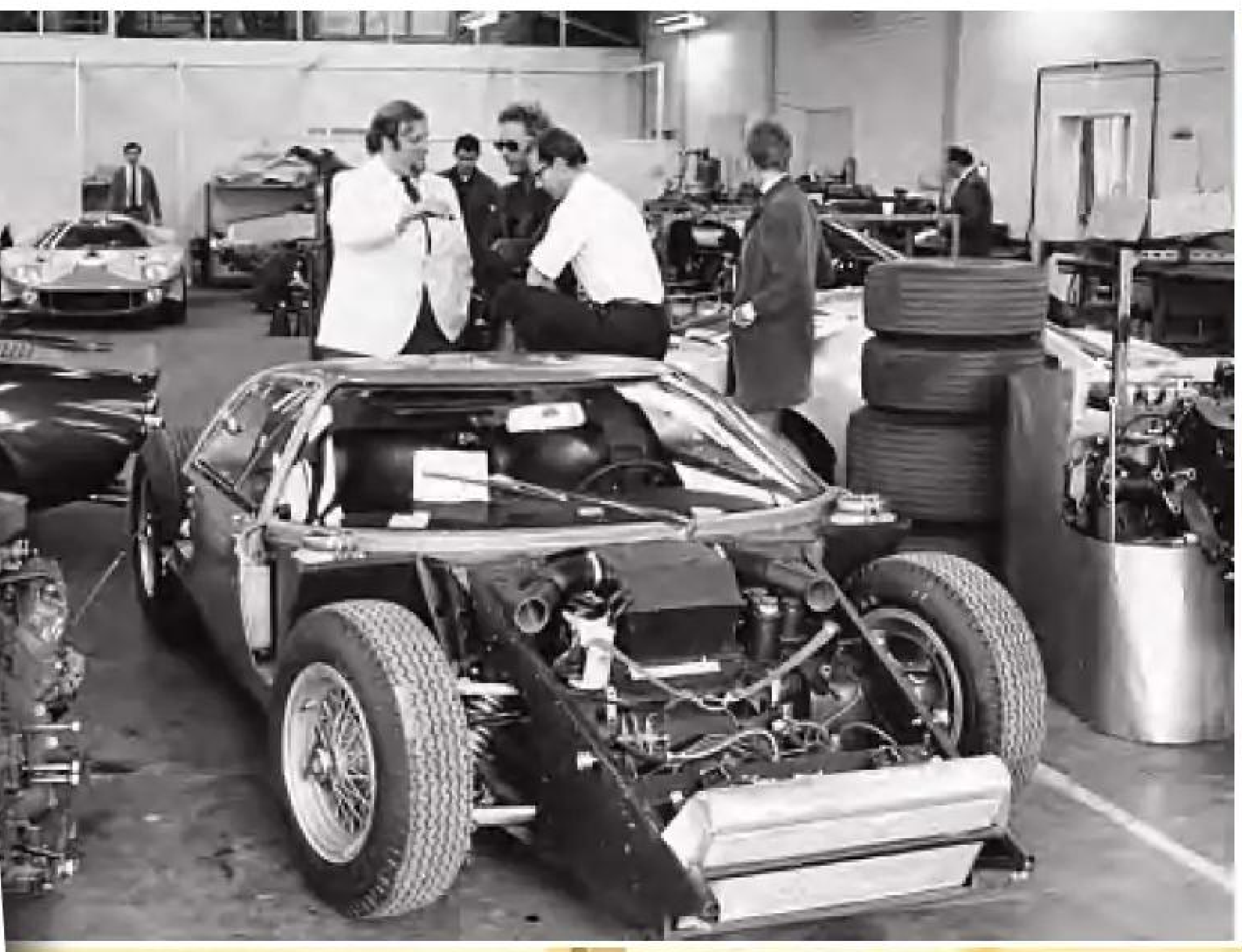
Rodney lent 1030 to a young *Autosport* magazine reporter by the name of Simon Taylor (see panel), and Ford also borrowed it for an advertisement. Taking inspiration from a newspaper headline that was originally used in reference to the Rolling Stones, they photographed it getting a parking ticket with the strapline: 'Would you let your daughter marry a Ford owner?'

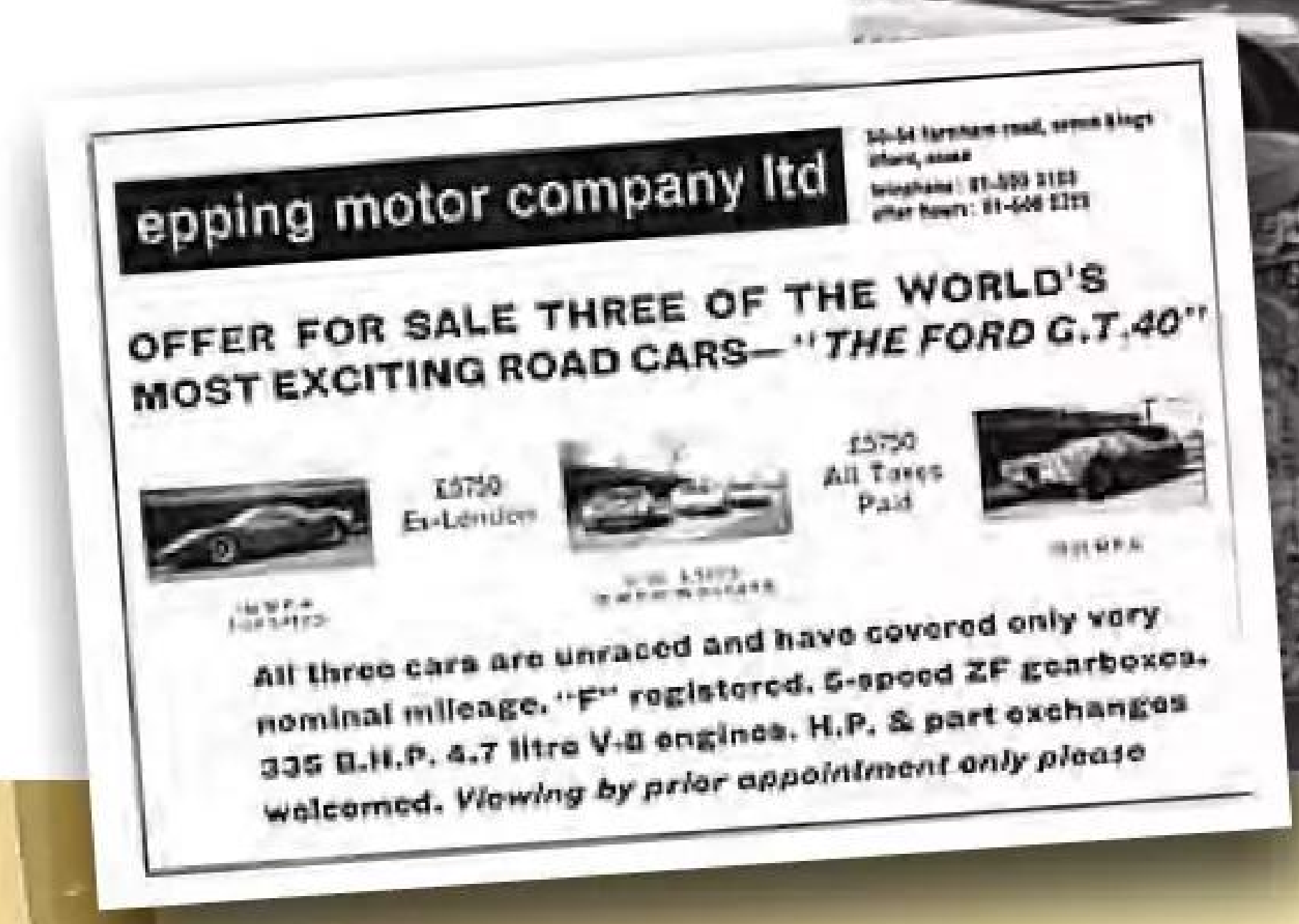
"They were easy enough to drive," continues Rodney. "I took out the president of the Essex Motor Club in one. I can't repeat what he said to me as we went along at 125mph in the wet. You have to remember that there was nothing else like it at the time."

Michael Hipperson would agree with that. In 1971 he bought 1005, which had been raced at Le Mans in 1965 by Scuderia Filipinetti. Unlike

FORD GT40

Sold/number built 1966-'69/31 (road cars)
Construction steel monocoque with glassfibre bodywork
Engine all-iron, ohv 289cu in (4728cc) V8, four Weber carburettors
Max power 390bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque 325lb ft @ 5200rpm
Transmission ZF five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones, **rear** trailing arms with transverse upper link, lower wishbones; coil springs, tubular dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** discs
Length 13ft 4in (4064mm)
Width 5ft 10in (1778mm)
Height 3ft 4½in (1028mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 11in (2413mm)
Weight 2237lb (1017kg)
0-60mph c4 secs
Top speed 170mph **Mpg** 14
Price new £6647 7s 11d





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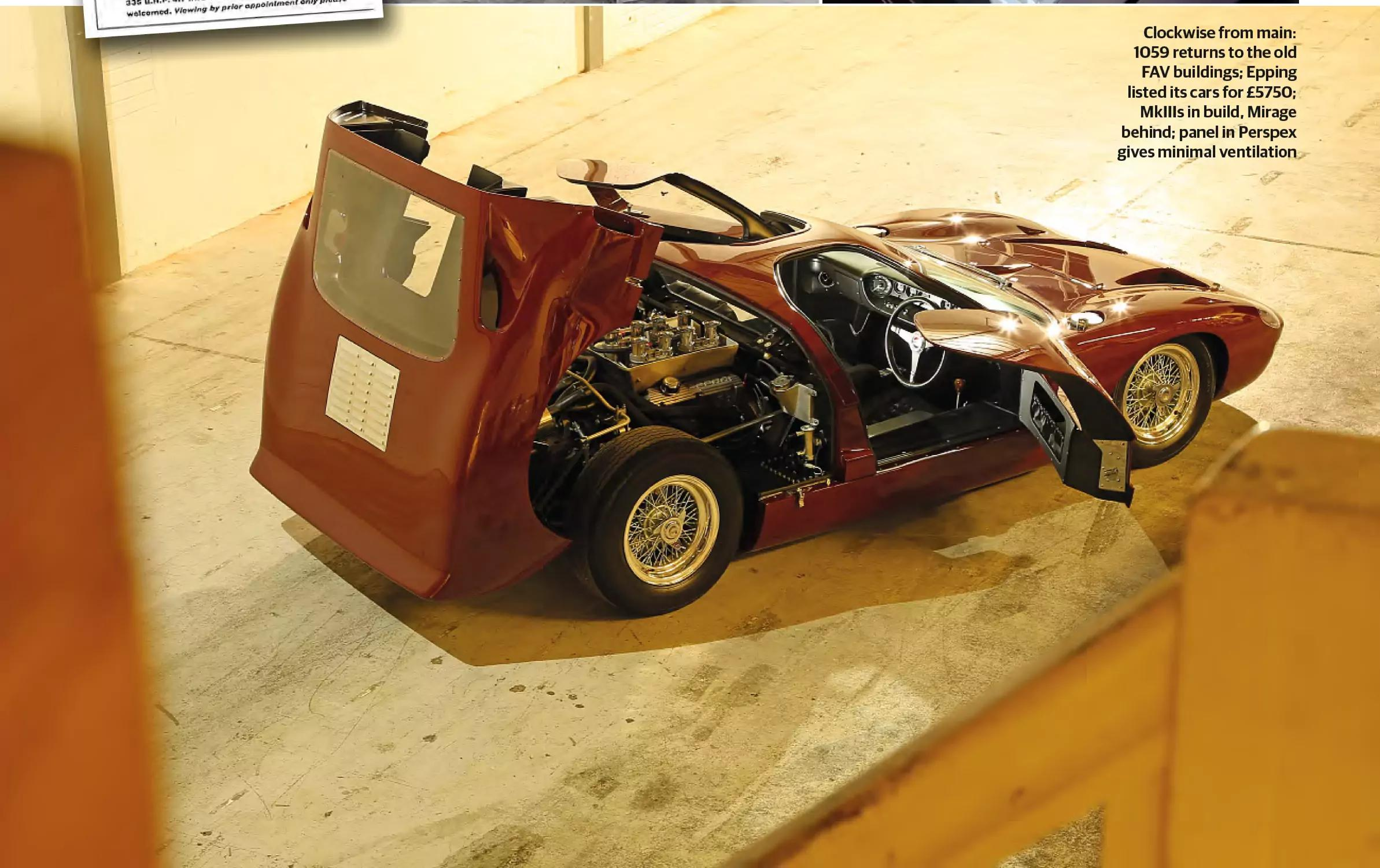


Clockwise from main: 1059 returns to the old FAV buildings; Epping listed its cars for £5750; MkIIIs in build, Mirage behind; panel in Perspex gives minimal ventilation the three cars Rodney owned, there had been no attempt to water down chassis 1005 in the intervening years. He explains: "I went to look at it, and it was exactly as it had been raced. It was even on racing tyres and open exhausts! You can't contemplate it today…

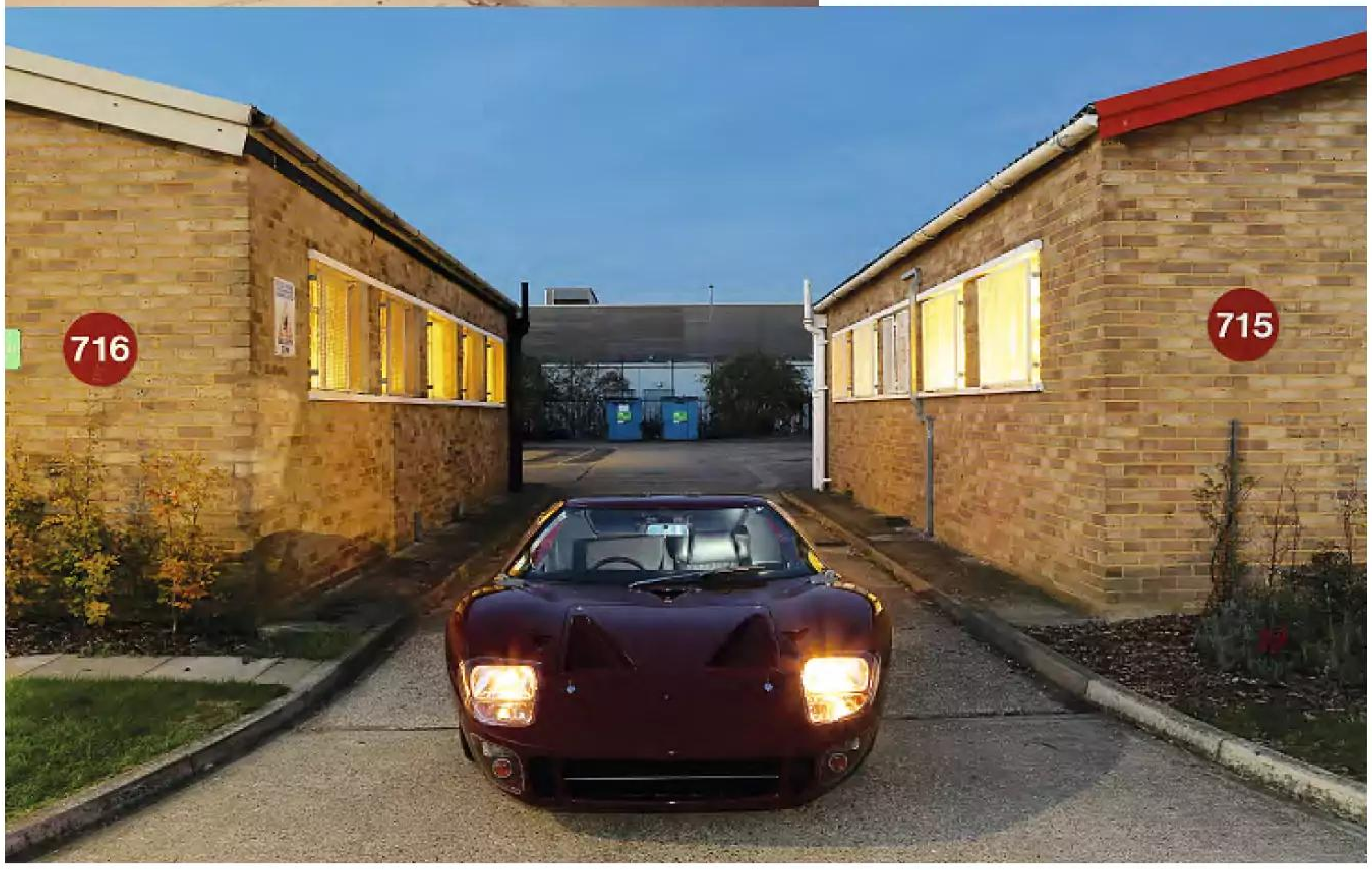
"When I got it home, Dad appeared at the window and looked very doubtful. I took him for a run up the road and after five miles he was sweating like a pig. He looked at me and said: 'Well, it's your decision.'

"It was dreadful on the road, really, but I did 4000 miles in it in three years. I used to take it out on a Sunday morning to pick up the newspaper. Roger Douglas-Hughes [who owned 1002] lived nearby, and we would meet up for a blast. I used it in a few sprints, too, but only at Duxford because there was nothing to hit if I spun it.

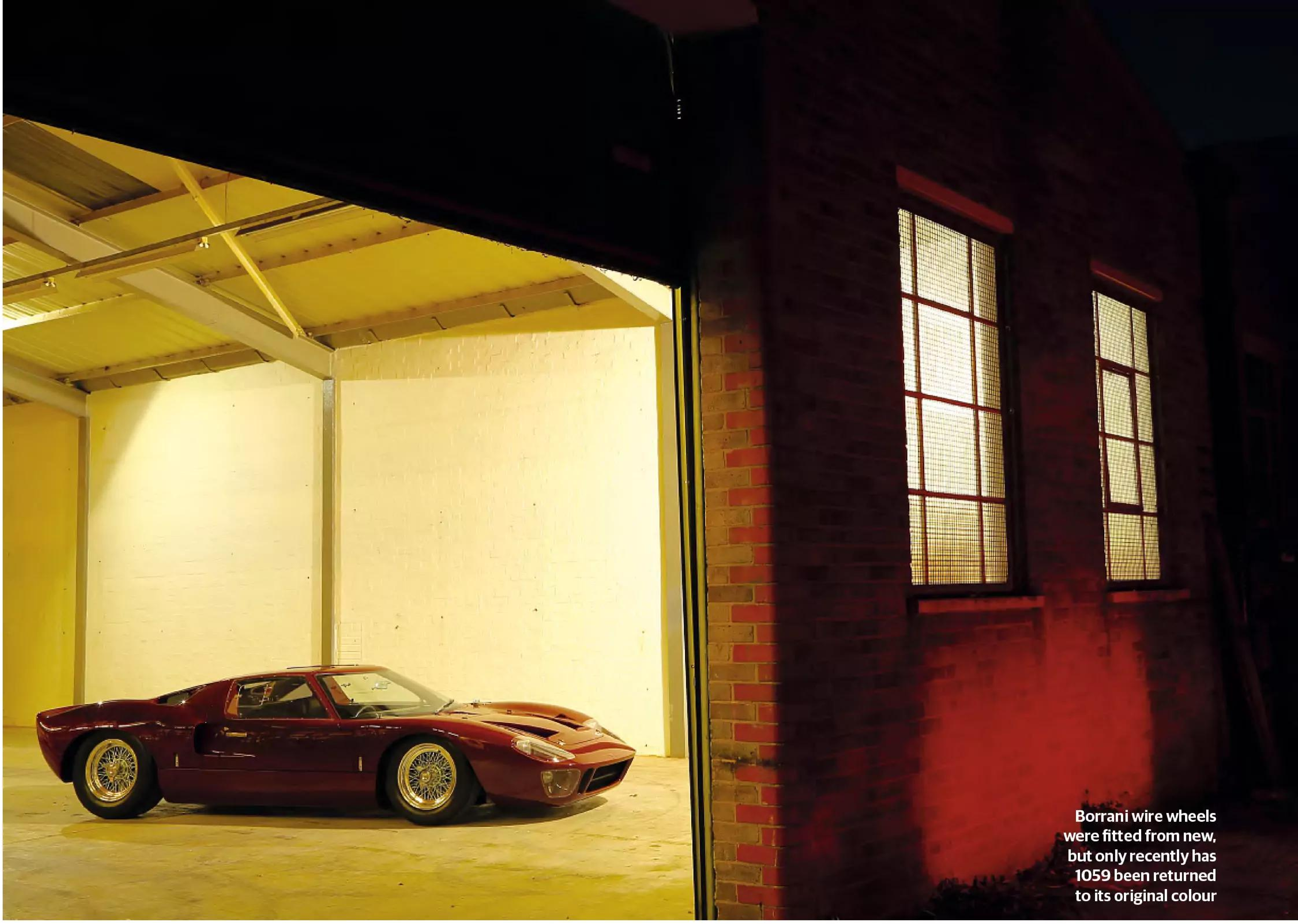
"The brakes were useless until they were warm – I used to do the first 10 miles of any journey with my left foot on the pedal to bring them up to temperature. It was noisy, you were sitting between the fuel tanks and you had to be very careful of white lines because of the racing tyres. And there was no spare, either.

"My dad tried taking it up to Snetterton once, when my brother and I were racing there. He got a puncture at Thetford and was stuck. There wasn't even a jack – not that you could have got a jack under it, anyway. He refused to drive it after that."

Over the years, Michael owned plenty of exotic machinery. Even though he sold it in 1975, the GT40 stands out – but he admits that's mostly because it was so outrageous, rather



Left, from top: Jack Frost lights up the rears during his ownership of 1059; on Banbury Avenue, where countless GT40s would have been loaded and unloaded in the yard; a nervous Page at the wheel – the handbrake is an impossible reach away in the bottom-left corner



Borrani wire wheels were fitted from new, but only recently has 1059 been returned to its original colour

than because it was great to drive. "It felt like it had come straight from Le Mans," he adds.

And it feels like that even in Slough's rush-hour traffic. Eventually – and after 'dawdling through the soulless subtopia of Betjeman's favourite town', to steal Barker's wonderful phrase – we turn off the A4 and rumble into the town's trading estate. At the western end of this sprawling complex is Banbury Avenue, one of few roads retaining the buildings that would have been here when the GT40 was new.

We pull up outside 714-715, which is where 'our' car was built and so much history made. Between 1964 and 1966, this was home to Ford Advanced Vehicles – as *Autocar* put it: 'A new subsidiary of Ford of Britain which has been set up to develop and build the Ford GT.'

John Wyer was put in charge, but from '65 the factory's race programme was handed over to Carroll Shelby's US-based team. Slough was still responsible for building the cars, as well as producing the 'street' versions. The prototype road car, chassis 1013, appeared in January 1966 and was used as a Ford press demonstrator wearing the registration number OVX 355D.

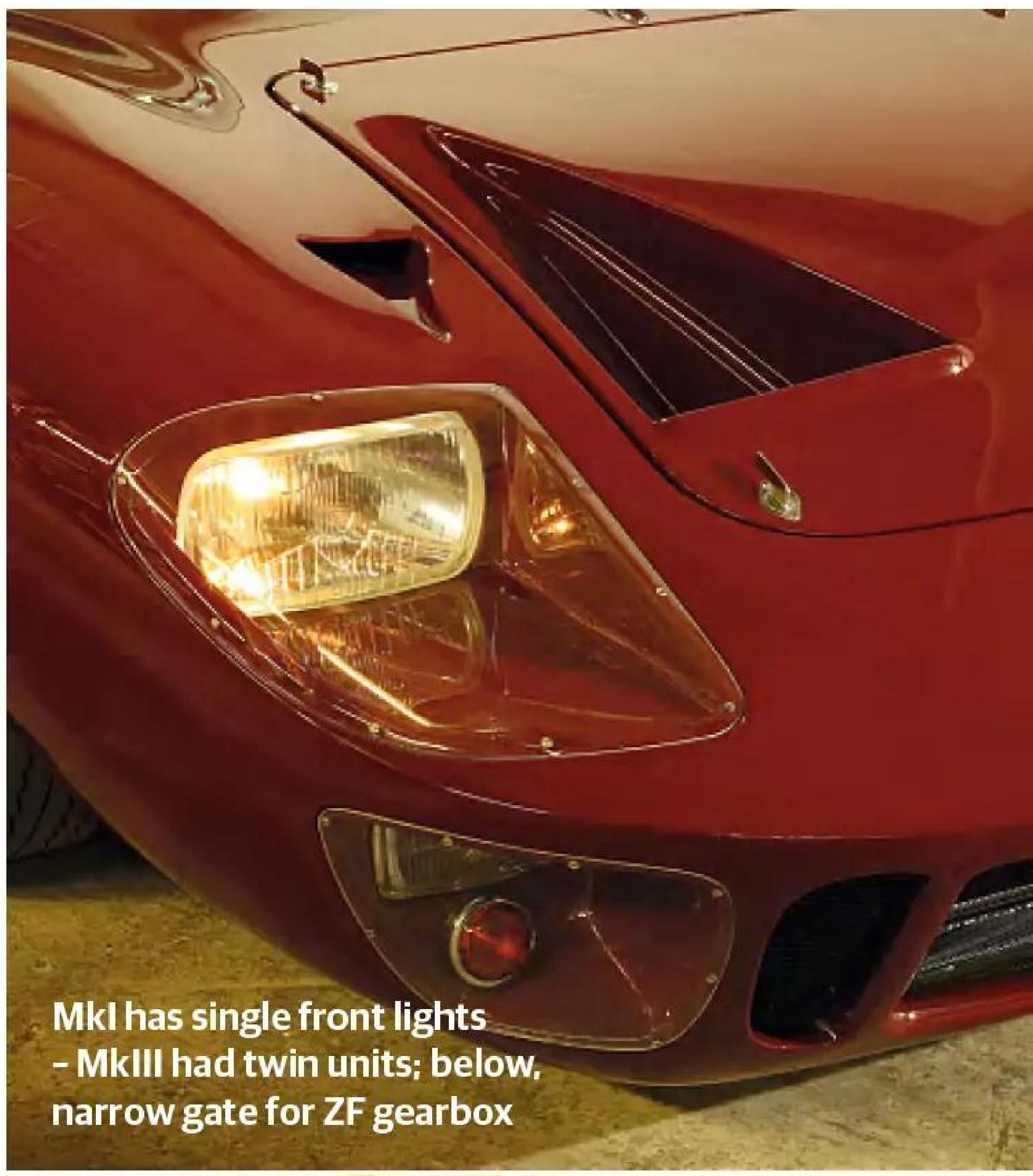
Ford withdrew from racing in 1967 following the GT40's second Le Mans win (both had come courtesy of the American-developed 7-litre MkII). That could have been that, but after Advanced Vehicles had been phased out at the end of '66, Wyer had stayed at Banbury Avenue and joined forces with John Willment to form JW Automotive Engineering Ltd. From January '67, and with backing from Gulf, the independent firm continued to build, service and race GT40s.

That would pay dividends in 1968, when the MkII – as well as JWA's own GT40 development, the '67 Mirage – was outlawed following the setting of a 3-litre limit for Group 6. The elderly GT40 MkI was therefore given a new lease of life in Group 4. JWA converted its Mirages back, and over the following two seasons the Slough outfit gave the car a glorious swansong.

"That period, until 1970, was the only time in Wyer's career when he could concentrate 100% on what he did best – running a race team," says Maitland Cook, who started at Banbury Avenue in '67. "He wasn't his own master from 1963 to '66; Ford called the shots. Later, he didn't have the terrible politics, and the team was lean, efficient and focused. All of his heroes were military people, and he always said that the ideal race team was like a commando unit, with everyone knowing exactly what they were doing.

"With Gulf, there was a clear understanding and a clear definition of roles. He had very able lieutenants in Horsman and [David] Yorke. Wyer was obviously the field marshal, but Horsman was in charge of engineering. He sacrificed everything – working long hours, cancelling family holidays, that sort of thing. And the engineering side of things was super. By 1968 there were no real problems with the GT40, and Horsman was a vital cog in that.

"That year, we were competing for the championship so it was very hard work and with long hours. But the atmosphere was good. There's this legend that Wyer was impossible. He was a tough taskmaster, yes,



MkI has single front lights – MkIII had twin units; below, narrow gate for ZF gearbox

but he was tougher on himself than anyone. And because he was so committed, he expected the same from you. If he knew that you'd give 100%, he'd do the same for you and do everything he could to help."

In 1968, JWA won Le Mans with the MkI of Pedro Rodríguez and Lucien Bianchi, which Maitland recalls with a wry touch: "Once the deal had been done to hand over spares and suchlike, there was no contact with Ford until we started winning. At Le Mans, [PR boss] Walter Hayes suddenly appeared early on the Sunday morning. He was good friends with Wyer, but Wyer's remarks weren't entirely complimentary!"

In 1969, the JWA team did it again, and with the very same car. In the hands of Jacky Ickx – who Maitland rates as the best of JWA's stellar driver line-up – and Jackie Oliver, chassis 1075 pipped the Hans Herrmann/Gérard Larrousse Porsche 908.

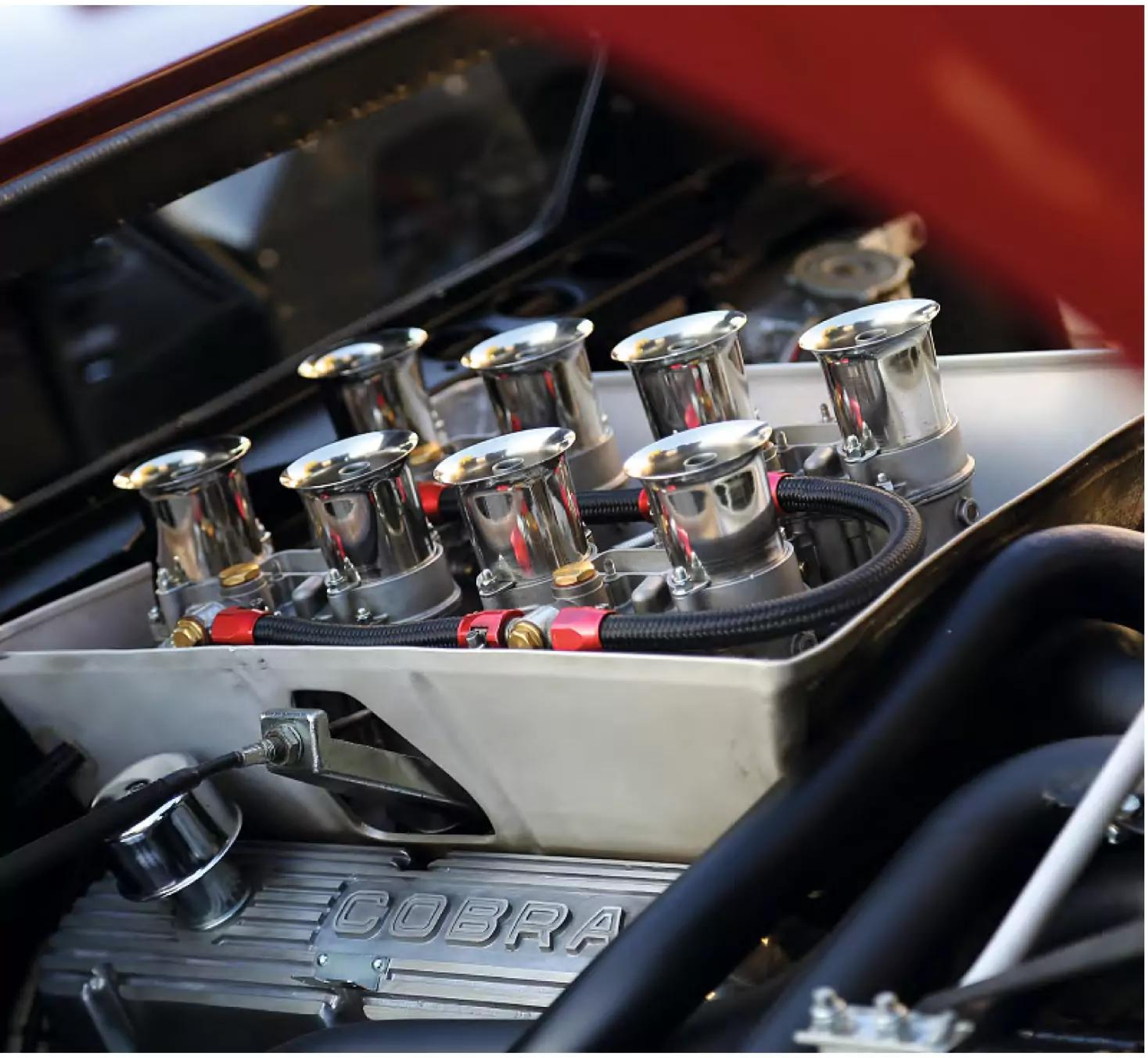
By 1970, however, the Fords were gone from Banbury Avenue. JWA had switched to running Porsches and another sporting legend was just beginning – that of the Gulf 917s.

Number 715 is currently occupied by film-processing company Cinelab, and everyone here is familiar with the building's past glories. As they stream outside to take pictures, we apologise to boss Adrian Bull – a genuine enthusiast who has a copy of Horsman's book *Racing in the Rain* on his desk – for our effect on his team's productivity.

It would be wrong to suggest that you take GT40s for granted at meetings such as the Goodwood Revival, but there's something about seeing one out of context that has made today even more special. Whether it's parked up on a Slough industrial estate or battling with modern SUVs in everyday traffic, this legendary sports-racer retains the ability to stop people in their tracks.

Thanks to *Max Girardo and Marcus Willis at Girardo & Co (020 3621 2923; girardo.com); Adrian Bull and everyone at Cinelab*

Left, from top: Innes Ireland stops at the Green Man near Silverstone during his test of the first GT40 road car, OVX 355D; Michael Hipperson's parents weren't hugely enamoured with chassis 1005, which had been raced at Le Mans in 1965; Ford's 289 V8, here in High Performance spec



THE GT40 MkIII

GT40 guru Ronnie Spain quotes the actual number of chassis built, including the various prototypes, as being 134. There were 87 'production' MkIs, MkIIs and MkIVs in total, with the MkIs appearing in both road and race trims. The MkIII, however, was a slightly different beast. Only seven were made, with the first being completed at Slough in late 1966 – SPP 604D was the right-hand-drive prototype and later owned by John Wyer. The first left-hand-drive MkIII, meanwhile, made its public debut in April 1967 at the New York Auto Show.

Intended to be a more civilised GT40 road car, the MkIII featured the 289cu in engine, twin headlights, raised front wings, opening windows (even in road spec, the MkIs made do with a Perspex panel) and an extended tail. There was a more plush cabin with a central gearlever and handbrake.

When Richard Feast drove a MkIII for *Autosport* in 1972, even Ford's press officer was quoted as saying: "Of course, there are people who don't regard it as a real GT40." A single Holley replaced the Webers, but the MkIII still gave more than 300bhp, and it acquired the welcome habit of not roasting its occupants. 'Wherever it went, it was the centre of attention,' wrote Feast – so in that respect it was every inch a pukka GT40.

Prototype right-hooker pictured on a quiet M4

DREAM

N495 RCD
GT40
1FMC
2
40

Ford's GT40 is still the ultimate motorsport fantasy, decades on from its first Le Mans win. How does the real deal compare against three of the best replicas and the reborn GT?

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

TEAM

20
20
GOODYEAR
V003 NXL

Chris Ball's red, 440bhp racer has the edge on outright power, but Ford UK's chassis 1008 is the purest representative of the GT40 legend

No nation has more passion for the Le Mans 24 Hours than Great Britain. The prestige of winning the world's most famous sports-car race has resulted in a succession of British competition legends – vintage Bentley, Jaguar C- and D-type plus the most dominant, the Ford GT40, with four successive wins.

Nostalgia for the valiant performance of these machines has inspired a passionate thread through classic motoring, as fans attempt to relive their 24 Hour fantasies. From chopped Bentley saloon to scratch-built kit car, the ultimate is a roadgoing Le Mans racer. Maybe it was Ford usurping Ferrari's cocky crown – single-cam, production-based V8s blitzing the Maranello exotics – or British engineering conquering the world, but the GT40's lasting appeal will match that of any modern supercar. A brutal, preying profile, with legendarily low 40in height matched to dragster-like performance and vice-free handling, Ford's finest in all its guises is the Lennox Lewis of classics. Everyone admires it. Why else would there be a thriving industry in the UK alone making lookalikes for those who can't afford the lottery-win pricetag for the real thing? The Lamborghini Miura may claim to be the original supercar, but its pedigree doesn't come close to the racing prototype started by Eric Broadley and Roy Lunn on Lola's backstreet drawing board in Bromley.

Football fans can no longer run on to Wembley's turf in a '66 shirt, but GT40 fans can still live that dream: be it a millionaire with the real deal at the Le Mans Classic or a homebuilt spaceframe with a Mustang motor. When they headed for La Sarthe *en masse* to mark the 40th anniversary of that long-awaited 1-2-3 there were 12 entered, along with 37-plus replicas, to honour Bruce McLaren and Chris Amon's famous drive in 1046. Hopefully a few toasted the moral victors, Ken Miles and Denny Hulme, who were cheated of the win by factory orders.

In our own tribute to that famous Le Mans victory, we decided to host a special party at Turweston airfield, where six incarnations of GT40 were invited along for a 2000bhp group test. Ford had even painted chassis 1008, the pride of its historic fleet, in black with silver stripes, white roundels and that immortal number '2' to get us in the mood.

Had Enzo Ferrari not used Ford's takeover bid to hassle *Signor* Agnelli of Fiat into supporting the Prancing Horse as an Italian treasure, the GT40 may never have existed. Thankfully, Enzo's refusal wound up Detroit's management enough to kick-start a race programme based in England, and the GT40's problematic and hurried birth started in August 1963. Typically, Ford's American management didn't appreciate the daunting challenge – some executives even talked about winning Sebring eight months later.

Lola's Broadley lost the first battle over a lightweight aluminium monocoque as Ford man Lunn persuaded him to go with a hefty, all-steel tub, because he hoped the new GT would go on to be developed into a road car. That decision was to ultimately divide the two designers, but, while the contract lasted, Lola's facilities quickly improved from Broadley's tiny original set-up.

When the first prototype GT/101 rolled out of FAV's new Slough facility on 1 April '64 it looked every bit the show car sensation Henry Ford II had hoped for. In stark monochrome livery, with tightly wrapped body by Abbey Panels and wide Borranis, it looked as cool and aggressive as Marlon Brando in a cap-sleeved T-shirt. PRs optimistically talked of a 200mph world-beater, but, as its brave first drivers discovered, it took off at high speed. After a disastrous test day at Le Mans, when Jo Schlesser and Roy Salvadori crashed the first two GTs, Salvadori famously took his disbelieving team boss John Wyer for a 175mph blast at MIRA. Wyer recalled: "At high speed there was a sudden sharp report, like a gun being fired, and the entire front end of the body disintegrated and disappeared over the roof. Roy showed no emotion of any kind apart from a resigned expression. We rolled to a stop and he said, 'Perhaps, Mr Wyer, you will believe me the next time I tell you anything.'"

"We live and learn," resolved Henry Ford II after all three team cars failed at Ford's first Le Mans sortie, mostly because the Colotti gearbox couldn't take the immense torque of the 4.2-litre iron-block V8. Bigger engines, new gearboxes and hasty aerodynamic tweaks drove the car up to ever higher speeds, but a year later they again failed to last the distance. "The GT40 was built like a tank and its enemy was always weight," said Wyer. "Overweight at birth, the car developed middle-aged spread. Wider wheels and larger tyres, with wider body

1966 AND ALL THAT...

In June 1966, south-west of Paris, and after years of publicly floundering in its bid to bring motoring's most iconoclastic patrician to heel, the Ford GT finally – and sensationally – became a success. The legacy of the Blue Oval's pernicious revenge on Enzo Ferrari for spurning Dearborn's solicitations was one of the most recognisable images in motorsport.

Forever etched in the minds of enthusiasts, the sight of the three GTs' blanket crossing of the line at Le Mans – although not blanket enough for some drivers – remains awe-inspiring. The message was very clear: 'We are Ford. Never underestimate us because of our populist roots: we can do anything, we can take on anyone and beat everything.' As a show of strength it almost had the fortitude to wipe out the humiliation of 1965, when Ferrari's P2 easily had the edge in early practice sessions, prompting the dropping in of the 7-litre engine. It made the Fords fearsomely fast in a straight line but fragile – and none survived the 24 hours.

Ford's bid to achieve sports-racer glory started inauspiciously in 1964, and it was only when Carroll Shelby joined the programme – based ever more vaguely on a mid-engined prototype from Eric Broadley's Lola organisation – that a positive outcome appeared possible. Re-equipped with the Galaxie's big-block 427cu in 7-litre lump, it looked as if it might compete – if a strong enough car could be built around the engine.

Ford wasn't taking any chances and released a trio of team cars along with 11 more to potential winners. The rivalry between the factions – Shelby, Holman and Moody, Alan Mann and a handful of privateers – spurred them on not least because it was clear that the company would prefer an all-American victory. That still rankles with some. Aussie Frank Gardner, who drove for UK-based Alan Mann Racing, said to *Motor Sport*'s deputy editor Gordon Cruickshank: "They wanted a Yank in most of the cars, and that made it hard to keep up the talent level."

When the flag dropped it wasn't the expected walkover, and the Ferrari P3s pushed hard. Some 12 hours later, however, the Maranello cars had gone and Ford product occupied the top six spots. This is what the senior management had flown to France to see, even if its own children were squabbling over who sat at the head of the table. It may have been unedifying to some, but for Ford it was a just return on an unprecedented, multi-million-dollar investment.

Eventually the American teams easily won the Le Mans showdown, as Bruce McLaren and Chris Amon in the lead Shelby American GT40 dubiously pipped on the line the rapidly slowing Ken Miles, who was sharing a stablemate car with Denny Hulme while Ronnie Bucknum and Dick Hutcherson brought a Holman and Moody car home third. History had been made, and as a result the world barely noticed the 10 MkIIs and GT40s with 'DNF' beside their entries, nor the Scuderia Bear car and its DNS.

That year was just the start: like a pugnacious barrow-boy made good, Ford rubbed Enzo and the rest of the motoring toffs' noses in it for the next three years at Le Mans. Even the mighty Porsche was embarrassed by Wyer's ageing GT40s with Le Mans' closest finish in '69. Job done. **James Elliott** panels to accommodate them, and larger brakes, it seemed that everything we did added weight." Finally, the Blue Oval army, with 14 GT40s shared between three teams, came good in '66. At 4pm on Sunday, the three sole survivors crossed the line in formation, much to the relief of Henry Ford II.

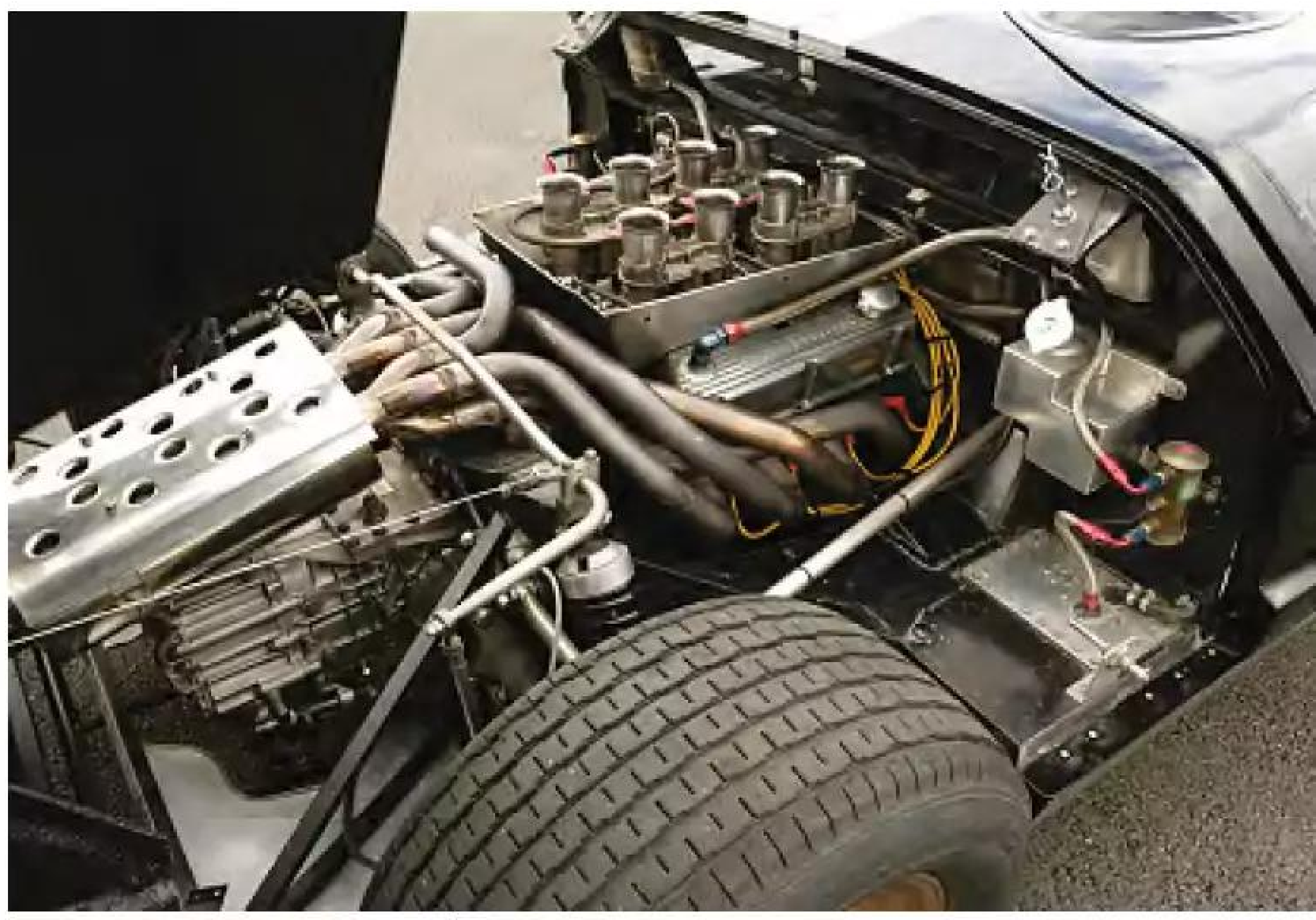
The black car here today was only the 21st built of the 133 GT40s and has been owned by Ford UK since it was finished in August 1965. Stepping over the broad sill while avoiding the right-hand gearchange and contorting behind the wheel into the steeply reclined seat is a challenge. Headroom is limited and, as the door swings shut, you duck to avoid a flat-top. Little wonder many racers and replicas have 'Gurney bubbles'. Smiths dials, a regimented line of switches and black-painted fascia underline the function of this endurance racer. Close pedals, a surprisingly comfortable seating position and a marvellous forward view say everything about the GT40's ultimate goal. Even the curve of those seductive front wings is interrupted by matched drum-sized fuel fillers, while the rear-view mirror is dominated by eight Weber trumpets close behind.

Switch the key, dab the throttle, press the starter and, after a brief, furious whirr, the big V8 explodes into life with a riotous and raw cacophony that reverberates up your backbone. From then it's a sensational blur as you try to soak up the magic of this fantastic machine. Once out of the dog-leg first of the sequential ZF 'box, the remaining throw of the H-style gate is slick and short as you unleash the engine's beefy torque and brutal surge. Other than the spectacular performance, which you expect, the GT40's handling and roadholding are in a different realm from that of anything else of its era. On the smooth runway there's not a hint of understeer or roll as it pounds out of turns, your torso welded into the seat as the g-forces load. The steering is beautifully sharp and balanced, but the brakes take a hefty, short push.

Tough, brutal, heavy and powerful, it feels unbreakable – in contrast to Ferrari prototypes I've driven. Even after 10 minutes, never mind a two-hour stint in the dark and rain, it feels very physical. The aggressive noise, the performance kick, the intense focus and the weighty controls are a serious workout. But immediately I crave more power and start eying up Chris Ball's red racer.

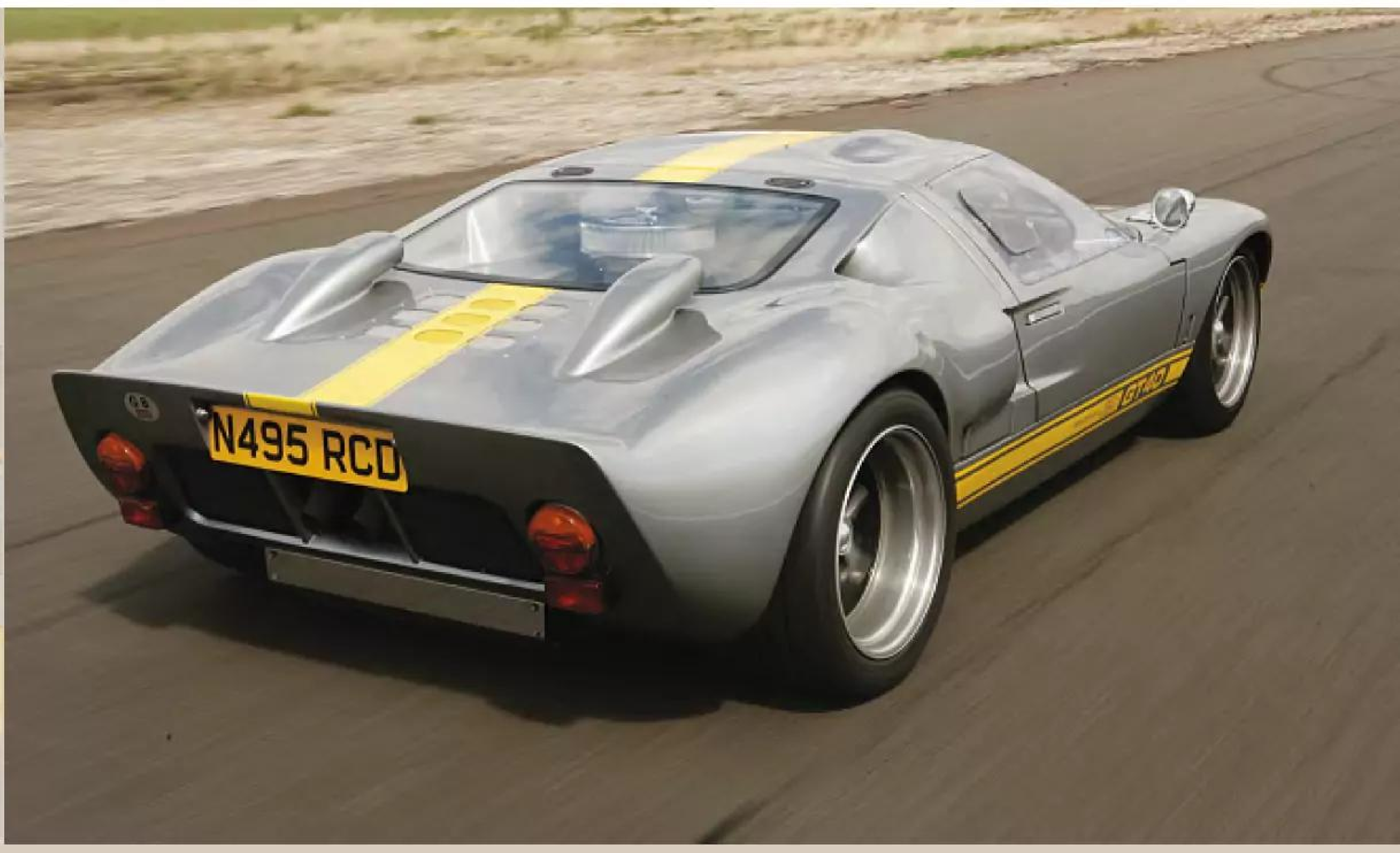
Like many enthusiasts, Chris never saw GT40s run in period. He says: "I didn't start going to Le Mans until the late '70s, but I read about them in *Motor Sport* and saw them on TV. During those impressionable teenage years they were the ultimate, and I've always considered them English with an American engine. They were designed here and built here, and all its most successful racing was from here. But Jacky Ickx was my hero."

After racing everything from an Alta-Jaguar in the '70s to a Chevron B16, Chris decided last year it was time for that original dream machine. "Prices had begun to go mad, so I started thinking about the best replicas," he says. "I even went to South Africa to look at the



Ford sprayed 1008 in this livery to mark '66 win. Since then it's been green, Gulf colours and back to black. Sequential change on ZF transaxle behind stock 302 motor

GTD40
TONY HUNT



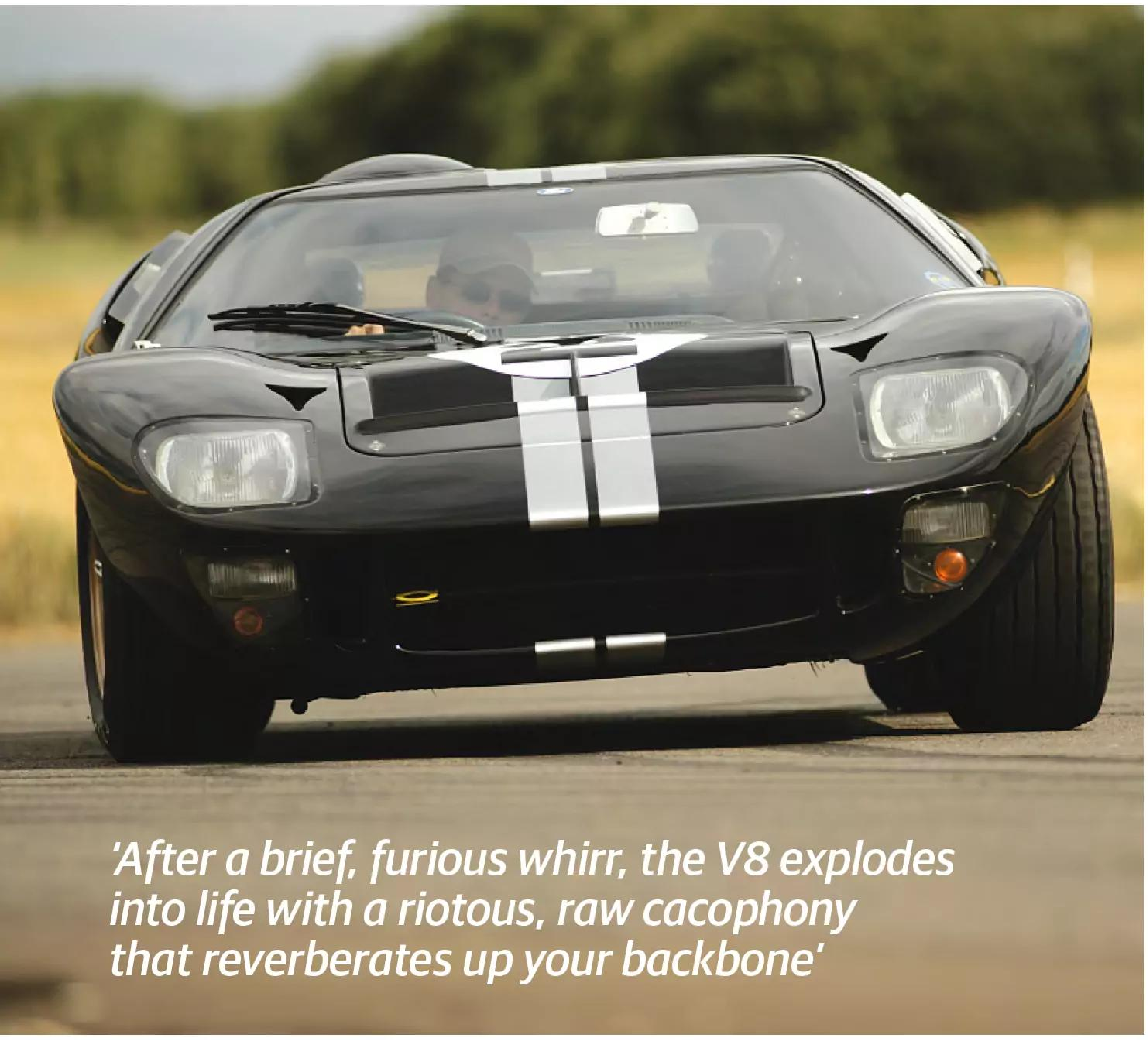
This High Wycombe-based computer consultant has thrown himself into GT40-owning life so completely that he is now the membership secretary for the GT40 Enthusiasts' Club. He says: "I'd been thinking of getting something like a D-type replica, but decided I might as well get the ultimate, and for me that is the GT40." He looked at a spaceframe-chassis GTD at a local garage and thought it was too much of a track car, before going to a club meeting and discovering that they needn't be. "Through the club, I heard of one in Aylesbury and paid £27,500 for a 1400-mile car," Tony says. "I was never tempted to build one myself – the important thing is to drive it." The spec is impressive: the GTD was factory-built for £63,000 in 1996, with 302cu in SVO engine, Edelbrock manifold and Holley four-barrel carb.

"Space is restrictive and working air-con is essential," says Tony, "but we've been to two Le Mans Classic events in it, plus Spa, and we'll tour the Pyrénées later this year. It's not a touring car – stowage-wise, you get one door pocket each – so we cheat by having a friend follow in something with storage space."

Tony has covered 3000 miles so far, and he pays £350 a year on a limited-mile insurance policy. "Just about anything else is more practical," he says, "but not much is as fun or as fast." How fast? "I've had 140-150mph on the Mulsanne and it's geared for 185mph, but whether it would do it and whether it would be safe… I'm not sure I want to find out!"

On the road you rapidly start to respect Tony for the sacrifices he makes for his road thrills. He is a big chap who has bought a small, cramped car. The Gurney bubble in the roof helps, as does shifting the replacement Tilton pedals away from the intruding wheelarch so the clutch is over the passenger footwell, but that creates an adverse offset with the steering wheel. It feels very strange, but the gearlever is in the right place – mounted on the sill – and the system is now rod- rather than cable-operated. The 'box is reversed, too, so it's a conventional pattern.

The Renault 21 Turbo-sourced transmission is painfully slow on the upchange, and you have to feel for the gears and resist the urge to force it through changes while kicking down the tough clutch pedal. The rest of the car – with a throbbing 350bhp – is not slow. You don't have time to worry about the petty inconveniences on the move because the GTD is a flyer, riding well but twitchy under pressure. It soon becomes comfortable – to a normal-sized person – and you could imagine taking on Tony's Continental tours – if you could only find somewhere to stow your toothbrush. **JE**



'After a brief, furious whirr, the V8 explodes into life with a riotous, raw cacophony that reverberates up your backbone'

CAV, but they weren't making right-hand drive cars at the time and they'd simplified the monocoque too much. It wasn't true enough, and I knew it had to be a real car."

Then one of the last batch of three GT40s built from parts stored by John Willment and completed by specialist Bryan Wingfield came on the market. Chris says: "I sold some shares and my B16 to buy it, but when I tested the car at Donington I thought I'd made a huge mistake. Compared to my Chevron it felt like a big barge, and over the kerbs it bounced all over the place. When I got out, my wife read my expression. 'At least you can put a deckchair in the garage and enjoy looking at it,' she joked. But, with Peter and James Denty's help, we made real progress sorting it, and by the end of the day I began to get the feel for it. Compared to the Lotus and Chevrons they work on, Peter found the beefy GT40's engineering a shock. 'Built like a brick shithouse,' he said. But every meeting is a step forward. The Chevron felt much quicker. At 650kg against 1050kg, it's really nimble, but the Ford's extra power balances things out. If I was going to be in an accident I'd choose the GT40. It just feels so safe and solid."

Before Chris bought chassis 1089, it had done just 194 miles, mostly clocked up by Jackie Oliver during testing before it went into a museum. "I've done about 500 track miles and 40 more on the road," says Chris. "With its switch-like triple-plate clutch and all-metal suspension, road driving is a nightmare. Pumping the tyres up to 35psi raises it an inch, which helps get it down my drive."

TORNADO TS40

PAUL WALTON

Having dismissed the mid-engined exotica he could buy for £30,000 as being not really all that exotic, the opportunity to build his own car consumed this 35-year-old recording engineer from West Molesey. Possessing the mechanical skills born of not having the cash to pay someone else to do the work, Paul bought a spaceframe chassis and body from Tornado Sports Cars for £7k, but the car came to almost £30,000 all-in. That and two years' labour – which is a quick build.

He recalls: "I did think about buying one someone else had built for roughly the same money, but I knew that I would want to change things, plus I wanted the challenge." And the job is far from finished, as Paul explains: "Building it is just the start; then comes the development. I've had the 'box rebuilt and want a limited-slip diff, plus to change all the rubber bushes to nylon."

At the Le Mans Classic Paul clocked 135mph on the Mulsanne with his 302cu in-engined car, and he says there was plenty more to come. Is it reliable? Totally. He was stationary in traffic for more than two hours on the day of our shoot, and the car never missed a beat.

"It's much more distinctive than anything else I could have had for the same money," Paul says. It's blisteringly quick, and you can't put a value on the satisfaction of building your own car from scratch. I knew I could complete the job if I took it on, and I think most people probably could if they applied themselves. There's nothing to be scared of." There are other advantages with the Tornado, says Paul: "It costs £350 to insure – cheaper than my Volvo estate."

On the road the high mileage Walton's car covers shows in how nicely it drives: it is easily the most usable of the three replicas, with a far lighter clutch, a more tractable engine and lighter, more precise steering. With a 3.44:1 final-drive ratio it is much more of a car that you could live with every day, and all that would prevent it from being a daily driver is the vision (a trait shared by all the cars). The ride is supple yet assured when it needs to be, and in the cockpit the patina of use and Paul's eye for detail lend the car the air of a real GT40. **JE**

***Thanks to** Tornado Sports Cars (tornadosportscars.com). UK spaceframe replica makers include Hawk Cars (hawkcars.co.uk), Southern GT (southerngt.co.uk) and Thruxton Sports Cars*

CAV GT40

CHRIS BEATTIE & JOHN VEASEY

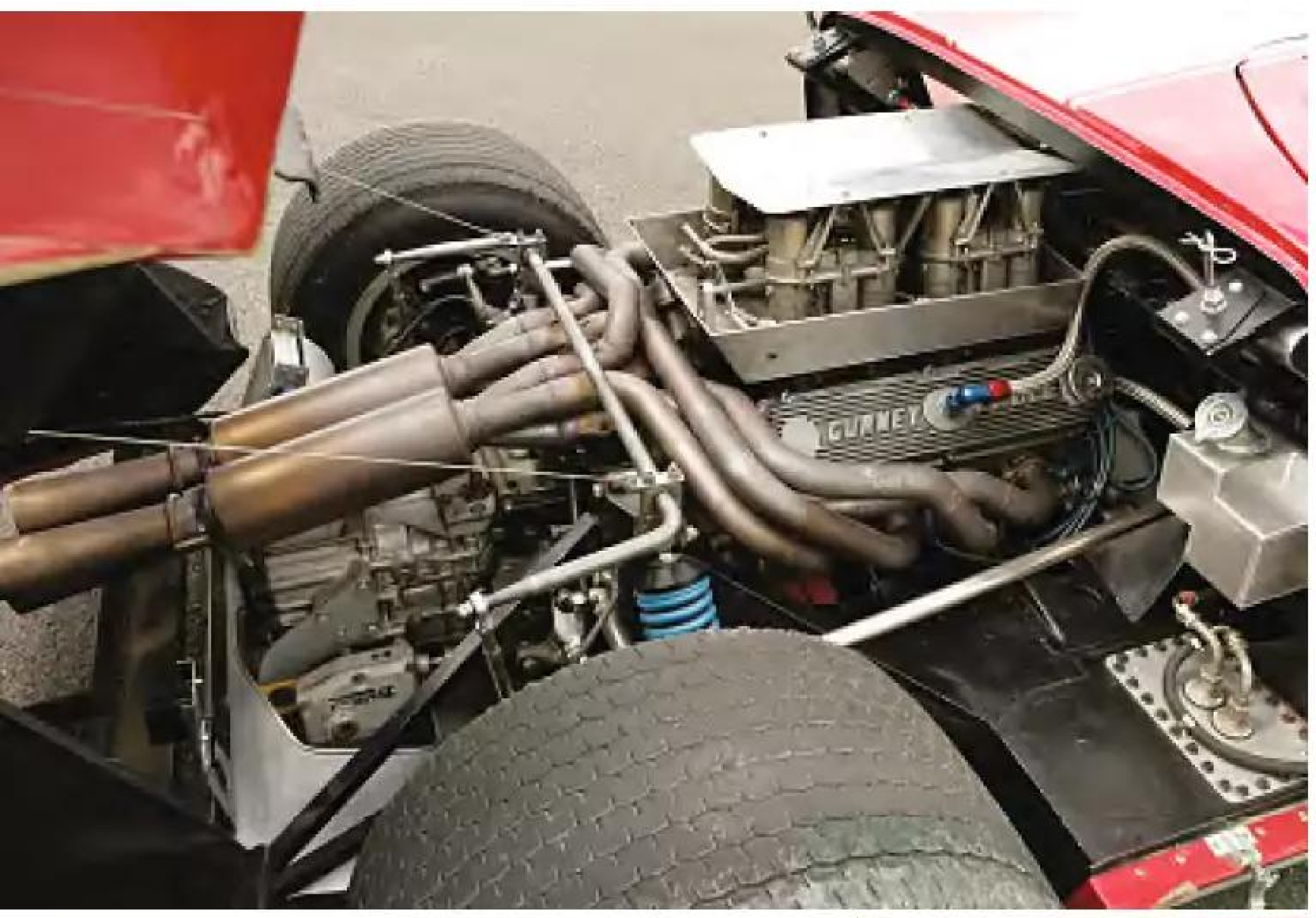
Not bad for a quid: the UK's first monocoque GT40 replica with a 365bhp short-block engine and a Getrag five-speed 'box from an Audi. But that's all the South African-designed CAV cost Chris Beattie and John Veasey, who won it in a phone-in competition run by TV show *Dream Machine*, which built the CAV before giving it away. Actually it was £2, because Chris confesses she got the question – 'Where is Le Mans?' – wrong the first time. The couple couldn't believe their luck and admit that sentiment still overshadows their enjoyment. Chris says: "The way we see it, you've asked the car here and we're just two normal people; we're not racing drivers, and we're still finding our feet with it."

That said, it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to own something like the CAV, and they're not letting it go despite receiving a few insulting offers from people who assumed that the Leicestershire lorry drivers couldn't appreciate such a machine. "We've built a special garage for it," says John, "but we can't get the car down to it. We'll work out how to do that next." After winning the car it was several months before they could take delivery because of hassles with registering it. When it was done, insurance cost £550. "We haven't flaunted it, because we still feel slightly embarrassed that we have it," says Chris, "but most people have been very nice."

With fewer than 200 miles on the clock and three laps of Le Mans under its belt – "it was an amazing experience, just to be there and be part of it all" – the CAV is still being run-in, which is a shame because that meant it was not at its best on the day of our test.

On the road the lack of use is obvious, with a bad misfire that seriously stunts performance, a heavy clutch and sticking throttle, plus a scarily skittish response to uneven surfaces, but the potential is there for all to feel. Once given a good seeing to and set-up right, this gorgeous all-steel, Lamborghini titanium-coloured machine will be simply awesome. Being all metal (rather than a plastic body over a spaceframe chassis), it weighs in at 2150lb, which makes it far heavier than the other replicas and its responses less electric – although it is still good for 0-60mph in 4.5 secs. Plus, being brand new and having a central gearchange, the cabin looks like a homage rather than a replica – but the payback is that it feels more complete and more solid. With the development that Chris and John have pledged to do, the CAV should soon be performing just as well as it looks and sounds. **JE**

***Thanks to** CAV (capeadvancedvehicles.com)*



Racer makes 440bhp due to Gurney Weslake heads. Chris Ball (right) chopped in nimble Chevron B16 for GT40 – he's still getting to grips with the extra 400kg

Despite his extensive racing experience, Chris is still learning to adjust to the GT40 on track. At our shoot he was still recovering from painful torn tendons in his hand from when the steering kicked back over the kerbs at Becketts during a British Grand Prix support race. He says: "It's very physical to race and I don't enjoy it through the tighter turns. The steering is good, but the car has caught me out several times. If you go in fast and accelerate too soon coming out, it'll flick around. It's too quick for me to catch, but through fast sweepers it's fantastic. I'm really looking forward to Spa."

Thanks mostly to Gurney Weslake heads, Chris' racer has spectacular grunt. High compression and crisper breathing lift the 5-litre's power to about 440bhp, and four-bolt mains safeguard the bottom end when that urge is unleashed. Having practised the sequential change in 1008, I felt more confident to sample the full-race performance. Thankfully, the gear selector's interlock prevents wrong-slotting. Once you're tuned to the discipline of changing gear by going up and down the 'box, the ZF's fast action, short throw and close ratios are a treat. "It's great for racing starts," enthuses Chris. "With the LSD there's no sideways kick, and it cannons away." It has neck-snapping punch, particularly when the Webers open wide at above 3500rpm and the 302 comes on cam. That uneven Detroit beat suddenly turns into a deafening and ferocious growl as the GT40 pounds forward like a stallion let loose. There's no chance of talking to a passenger when those eight trumpets just behind your left shoulder greedily suck deep. Even four decades on, this raw and loud delivery is overwhelming, and those hairs on the back of your neck could be shaved in one clean sweep. Once you've sampled it, you can't wait to slow down and do it again.

Just for fun we line up Ford's black car with Chris' red racer and the new GT for a drag race. Art editor Martin's evil smile in the white GT is a picture, and when the flag drops, the new car and racer pull clear. For half the runway they are neck and neck, but gradually the racer edges ahead to take the crown as I chew on their dust in 1008. But what a sight as ancient and modern gun it out against a dramatic twilight, with dust squirrelling up behind and exhaust roar cannoning out of those big bore, double-barrel tailpipes.

That moment underlines the fever for these fabulous Fords and justified the modern GT. Ford short-changed enthusiasts in the '60s, with a compromised and ugly road conversion of its famed racer, but the magnificent GT delivers those childhood fantasies in a package you can enjoy every day without going deaf or pulverising your backbone. Shockingly, I've overheard youngsters, who have never heard of Miles, Ruby, Amon or Whitmore, claim the new GT is cooler and better-looking than the original. As unforgivable as it sounds to purists like me, it's heartening that the mystique of Ford's greatest achievement lives on. I would not be surprised if in 2046 they're still racing real ones, building replicas or listing it on virtual driving games.

FORD GT
MATTHEW CARTER

Former *C&SC* editor Matthew says: "I got my GT last year and have done 4500 miles. Nothing has gone wrong." It's no surprise he reckons the bad press for Ford's modern take on the GT40 is unfair. "Mine was the second into the country [28 officially came to the UK], and it's bloody fantastic," he says. "It is very quick: some people have modified them further, but 550bhp is more than adequate for me."

Surely a six-and-a-half-foot-wide mid-engined V8 two-seater is a tad impractical? "Not at all," Matthew insists. "The best thing about it is that you can use it every day if you want. You have to plan your route to avoid width restrictions and park it with enough space to get the doors open, but otherwise it is fine." And reliable. In May, Matthew was motoring through France in the GT and got stuck on the infamous Paris *péripherique* – during rush hour, on a bank holiday weekend. He admits he was worried, but the Ford just "trickled round like a Fiesta".

That is the secret of the GT: the asking price speaks volumes, but in many ways it doesn't feel like a supercar at all given its comfort, equipment and even 18mpg, although Matthew admits the attention can get a little much. "White van man has a penchant for pulling alongside, driving with his knees and taking pictures with his phone," he says.

And there are elements that betray the car's bulk and status. "Visibility is awful," adds Matthew. "You'd get it in a single garage, but you wouldn't be able to get out, and you have to be quite sparing when packing."

On the road the GT has two distinct characters. At manoeuvring speeds it is cumbersome – except for the over-light power steering – and charmless thanks to the cheap-looking transmission tunnel and details. With a prod of the right foot, however, working up through the six gears, *boulevardier* becomes brute. The pace is searing, the mighty 13in and 14in disc brakes are immense, the ride sublime and the steering perfectly weighted. With 2.7 turns lock-to-lock, it is rapid and sharp and gets better the quicker you are going. Turn-in is precise, balance close to perfection. What's more, the GT is amazingly refined and quiet considering there is a supercharger wailing away behind your ear atop 5.4 litres of power. It may be criticised for being many things – and for not being many more – but it is the quickest you will ever go while feeling that you are in a normal car, a safe box that will cruise to the shops. Everyone should use these cars like Matthew does, but sadly few do. **JE**

REPLICAS RUNDOWN

Whether you want to buy a turnkey recreation, a box of bits or a kit that someone else has built and fettled, start with the GT40 Enthusiasts' Club (gt40enthusiastsclub.com). It is the font of all knowledge on individual cars and offers advice, help and engineering expertise.

Before you buy, make sure you have the space to keep it – to open the doors and work on it needs up to two and a half car widths. Parts are available, so the main consideration is engine: avoid anything less than a V8 unless fuel economy is an issue, and a short-block is preferred. Most common 'boxes are Renault and Audi 016, but there are cars with Porsche G50, ZF and even Hewland. Engine and 'box have a major bearing on price.

Secondhand monocoque cars are too scarce to value; all the spaceframe cars are much the same in terms of looks and performance. Most have been tailored by their owners, so if you want a brand-new car – factory- or self-built – try the current manufacturers. **JE**

GT

XGT-2, the GT40 MkII in which Graham Hill led the epic 1966 Le Mans, breaks cover in restored glory after 40 years in hiding

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TIM SCOTT@FLUID IMAGES**

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FORD
ALAN MANN RACING LTD. BYFLEET ENGLAND

7
ALAN MANN RACING LTD. BYFLEET, ENGLAND
GOODYEAR

'The preparation for Ford's third Le Mans challenge reached NASA-style levels of research and testing: the Blue Oval was leaving nothing to chance'

With most great cars I have been blessed to drive, I'm usually impatient to get on with it. But with the legendary Ford GT40 MkII, more specifically chassis XGT-2 – the very 7-litre Le Mans weapon that Graham Hill gunned into the lead at the momentous '66 24-hour French classic – the situation is quite different. As a Ken Miles fan (there's a tribute to him in my garage), that race has poignant meaning to me, and to find myself sitting in one of the eight MkIIs that lined up at 4pm on Saturday 18 June is a huge moment. I'm role-playing, not just for the photography, but also because I want to live and feel the authentic experience in this brilliantly restored survivor. My gear – period-style Nomex, string-backed driving gloves, cotton-wrap face protection, tank goggles and black helmet – helps me to slip back to that epic day for Henry's racing army. This morning I even cut up sticky-backed white stripes to make my old Bell helmet look like hero Hill's.

XGT-2's preserved state is wonderful, and I feel hugely privileged to be the first to test it after its masterful restoration by Precision Auto, Mark Allin's talented, Massachusetts-based team. Once ensconced in the Formula bucket seat – a specific request by Grand Prix ace Hill over the factory's signature parachute-silk and brass-ringlet item – you quickly feel comfortable. The preparation for Ford's third Le Mans challenge reached NASA-style levels of research, testing and development, all with massive investment. The Blue Oval was leaving nothing to chance this time. And, unlike the rival Ferraris and Porsches, the MkII feels comfortable and organised from the off. For a racer, the ergonomics – perfectly positioned outside-right gearlever gate, relaxed stretch to the thin, leather-trimmed three-spoke wheel, clear gauges and switchgear – is brilliantly considered. Restorer Mark went to remarkable lengths to source or fabricate an authentic-looking wiring harness, even making the correct connector plugs from scratch. "The big parts were easy, but the little details were a challenge," he recalls of the two-year rebuild.

The '66 Le Mans saga is one I know in detail, and sitting in XGT-2's warm cockpit, baked by the high sun, the interior details and dynamic aura of this hugely important car, vividly bring history to life. As I carefully close the door, I can't help thinking about Miles' frustration when he crushed the flyweight aluminium opening with his helmet in the sister Shelby Team car P/1015 at the start. The resulting crunch forced an early pit to sort the damage, and ultimately may have lost him the race. I practise fastening the belts, remembering that Ford team boss Leo Beeb had ordered that harnesses were secured at the start, rather than waiting for the Mulsanne to clunk-click. Were nobody watching, I'd have tried a running approach, leapt in, slammed the door, flicked the starter, and roared off, leaving long lines of torched rubber just as Hill did for his start from sixth slot along the pit-wall.

Maybe Hill knew that the car wouldn't last. Perhaps Dr Dick Thompson's practice shunt had left a nagging doubt that a weakened component would eventually let go before the 24 hours was up. Whichever way, Hill was on a mission when Henry Ford II, the event's Honorary Grand Marshal, dropped the *Tricolore* at 4pm. By the end of the first lap the mustachioed ace was well clear in number seven, with the mighty torque of the 7-litre V8 punching it, rocket-style, down the most famous straight in the world. Miles clocked 204mph down the Mulsanne at the April test day, and Hill made the most of the big-block's pulverising performance by continuing to set the pace, putting pressure on co-driver Brian

GOODYEAR
FORD

Left: longer nose and adjustable Gurney spoiler were the result of extensive aerodynamic testing, and the MkII felt really planted at high speed. Below: in 1966 Graham Hill was at the top of his game – as he proved with this stonking start at the 24 Hours

CHAMPION
CHAMPION
Mobil Mobil Mobil

Alan Mann Racing Ltd
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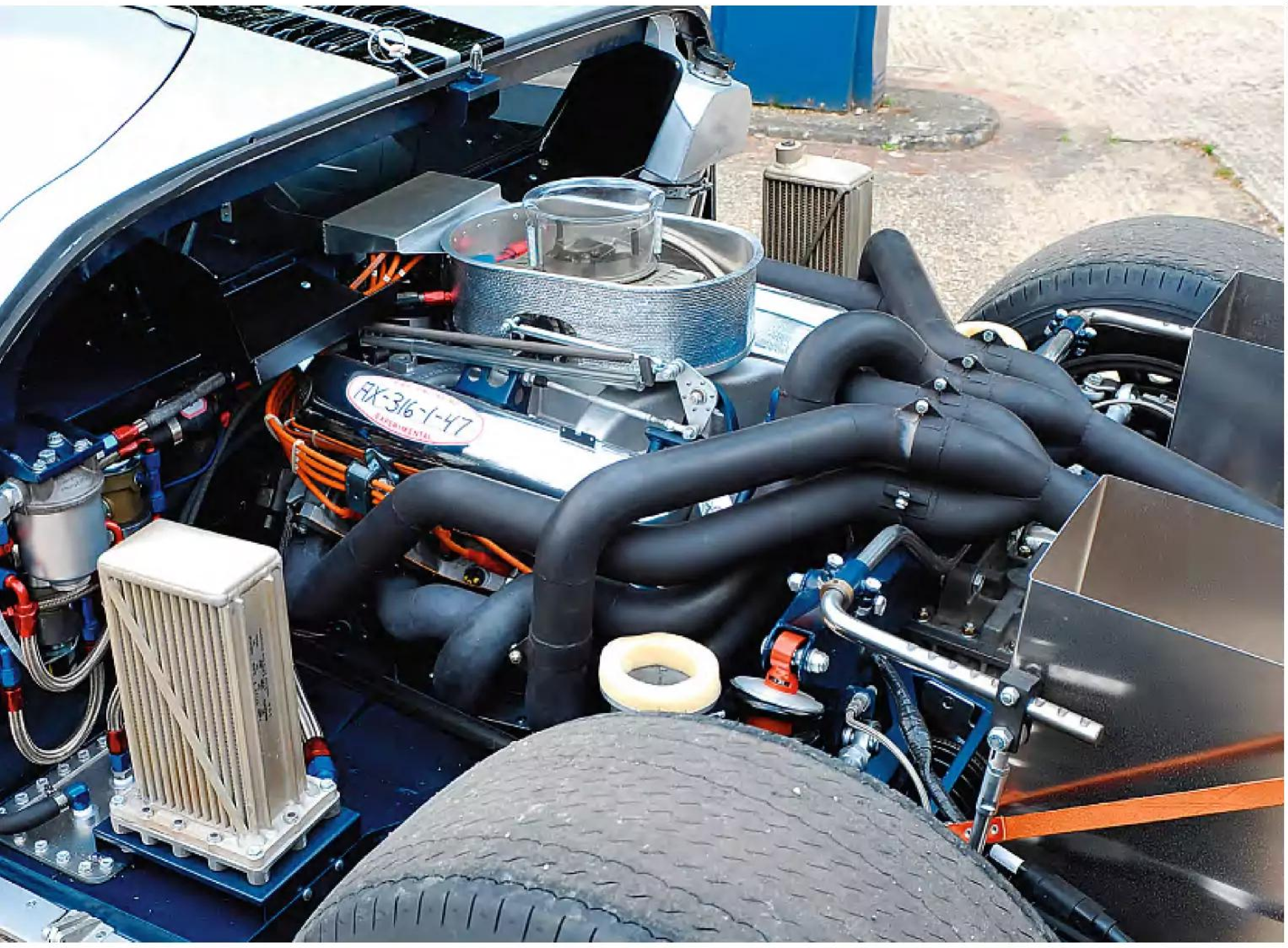


Left: the small-block looks a little lost in the GT40's engine bay, but the mighty 427 packs it out – note the homologation luggage boxes. Above: Hill chats with team boss Alan Mann and mechanic in practice

WATER
FUEL PRESS
OIL PRESS
OIL TEMP
PARK LIGHTS
RHEOSTAT
FUEL
FORD G.T.

‘Sweat weeps under my helmet and the face-wrap is coarse against my dry mouth, but the sensations are authentic’

WILLANS
NOT VALID AFTER
2012

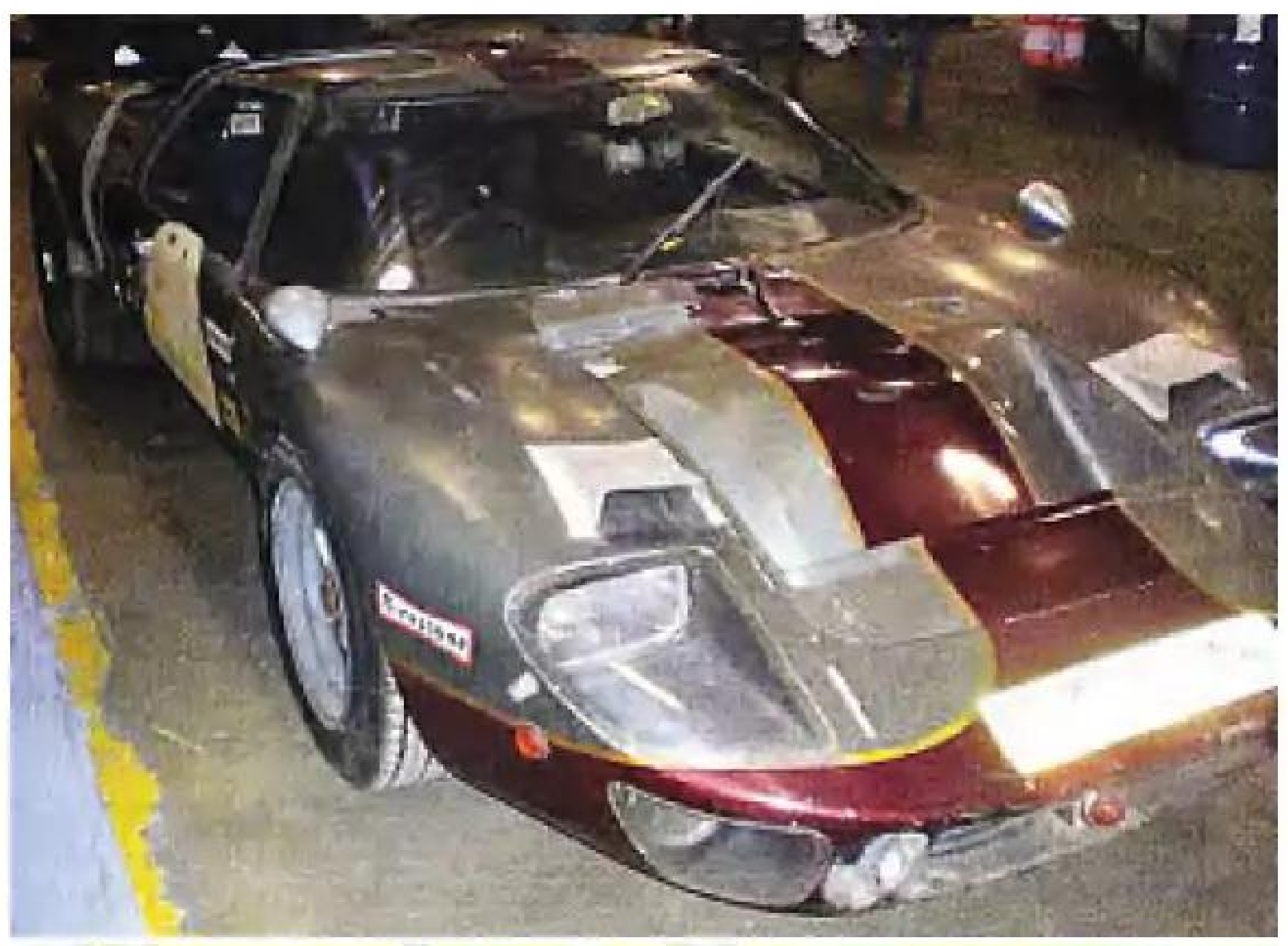
Muir, who had been drafted in at the last minute to replace the disqualified Thompson. British team boss Alan Mann's original pairing had been star-studded, with Hill matched with fellow BRM driver Jackie Stewart, but a scary crash at Spa had left the Scot out of action, and his pal Jim Clark wouldn't entertain a Le Mans drive, claiming it was too dangerous. Hill and Muir remained out in front until niggling problems forced unscheduled pitstops, including for a puncture. During the early evening rainstorms, fumbled pit work lost the pair more time. In the lead, Miles and Kiwi teammate Denny Hulme were storming around, barely lifting in the dark and wet – much to the consternation of the pit crew and the tall Texan team boss. Hill in XGT-2 was having no luck; a pit instruction to switch to rain tyres directed him in, but upon entering the pitlane he encountered chaos and overstretched mechanics. This left no option but to rejoin the race and try again later, but the delay cost him two laps and dropped XGT-2 further down the field. Finally, close to midnight, Hill stopped out at Arnage corner after the right-front suspension collapsed. 'Drawing upon my vast experience, I froze the bloody controls and motored off on to the grass verge, considering it healthier than the track,' the suave Englishman later wrote.

Sitting in XGT-2, a few days short of 44 years later, I feel very remote from that long, wet night and the filthy, stained Ford MkII team survivors that roared on to dawn. Eventually, Beeb decided to stage a 1-2-3 finish, which ultimately denied front-runner Miles his dream win. Due to a technicality – P/1046, driven by Bruce McLaren and Chris Amon, covered a greater distance having started fourth – Miles lost his hat-trick after chalking up Sebring and Daytona victories for the Blue Oval. Two months later Miles was dead from a freak testing accident with the experimental J-car at Riverside. Shelby lost not only a great development driver, but also a dear friend.

After the frustrating Le Mans sortie, XGT-2 was sent to Shelby America to join Ford's 'MkII Tour' of shows and dealerships across the USA. After four months and 25 appearances, from Packy Webb Ford in Wheaton, Illinois, to Lindquist Ford in Bettandorf, Iowa, XGT-2 went into storage at Holman Moody's base in Charlotte. Its second life started in 1968, when it was rebuilt to Group 4 spec for Malcolm Guthrie and fitted with a Gurney-Weslake Boss 302 V8. To meet new regulations, the original alloy roof structure was skinned in paper-thin steel, and the car was renumbered P/10009 – an older GT40 that Guthrie had crashed in the Kyalami 9 Hours – to sway the scrutineers.

For 1969, the disguised XGT-2 was back at Le Mans, painted silver-grey with a maroon stripe. Again the Alan Mann-entered car had no luck after Aussie Frank Gardner got tangled up in John Woolfe's fatal first-lap crash on the exit of Maison Blanche. Slicing through the flames,

Seductive rear view shows adjustable Gurney spoiler and luggage cases



Clockwise from above: Walsh's homage to hero Hill; the MkII will understeer when pushed; the car as found with Gil Jackson; the view in the Ferrari mirrors at Le Mans

Gardner ran over burning debris and holed the radiator. Back in the pits, he reported a '100ft wall of flame' and the shock of finding Chris Amon's blazing Ferrari 312P right in his path. Moments like that are etched into XGT-2's history, and such dramatic imagery haunts me as I sit in the growing heat. The delays and damage eventually resulted in retirement after five hours. In 1970 Guthrie sold XGT-2 to collector Gil Jackson, with a hoard of spares. The plan to return it to '66 spec never happened, and in 2007 the timewarp car was sold again. Few people had seen XGT-2 in more than three decades, but dealer Gregor Fisken was lucky to be present at Precision Autos when the original roof was revealed. He says: "With all the rivets drilled out, we took a corner and pealed off the steel. It was a great moment." From there, Mark Allin's team set to work reviving the old warhorse in its most famous livery as the silver hare from '66.

After reading this you can appreciate my fever for the ultimate GT40, the top dog of Ford's racing pedigree. At last, it's time to fire up that 485bhp 6997cc big-block. The motor roars and, as the oil warms, the heat rises in the cockpit despite the sophisticated insulation. I cruise for the first few laps, eagerly watching the Stuart Warner gauges – specifically the oil and water temperatures on this close, humid day. Sweat weeps under my helmet and the face-wrap feels coarse against my dry mouth, but the sensations are authentic. Time to stretch this GT40 king, and I'm instantly blown away by the slick, short-fire gearchange. The Kar Kraft T-44 is a rare and highly prized item, so slicing up and down the sweet gate is another privilege, but you barely need to change with such an avalanche of torque from the dry-sump 427. This machine could stroke from a taxi to a 200mph charge with no trouble.

As we pound out of a fast left on to the straight, XGT-2 blasts off like *Gemini VII* – Neil Armstrong would recognise its thrust. The speed is deceptive because the power is so effortless; there's no speedo, but you know the pace is heady. Like all GT40s, it feels strong and safe, a comfort zone no Porsche or Ferrari can deliver. Until 1966, Ford's mid-engined missile had a clean record, but the deaths of Bob McLean at Sebring and Walt Hansgen testing at Le Mans proved you can't account for driver error. As I coast around for a final lap, I'm fixated by the wiper: the system is almost identical to a Boeing 707's, geared to sweep at 100-plus times a minute. Roaring down the Mulsanne, rain slashing at that steeply raked glass, you needed the best wiper in the world.

A weekend after my drive, XGT-2 was back at La Sarthe for a demo run at the Le Mans Classic, and Gregor was the lucky man following in Hill's tracks. "The handling feels so friendly and surefooted," reports the enthusiastic historics front-runner. "At 6000rpm down the Mulsanne, we pulled 150mph with ease and it felt as solid as a rock. The longer nose transforms the aerodynamics – a real step forward – and a Ferrari P3/4 feels nervous in comparison." Chris Amon, who won in '66 with McLaren, reported: 'You could set the MkII up to slide progressively, but the only problem was that if you got out of line in the wet it was like losing a truck. Its momentum took hold and the thing would spin for ever.' A year later Amon switched to Modena and was asked how the P4 and GT40 compared: 'Well, it's like getting on a stallion after a stint on a carthorse.' Unsurprisingly, Henry J II wasn't happy!

For me, however, the experience reaffirmed my feelings about the MkII, and that awesome big-block looks tailored for this legendary racer's engine bay. The ultimate '60s sports-prototype? No argument for a Ford fan.

***Thanks to** Gregor Fisken, Will Stone and James Mitchell at Fiskens; Mark Allin at Precision Auto; Simon Blake at Historic Autos*

WHEN ROOTES WENT Wild

Decades after the Sunbeam Tiger made its debut, its attractive mixture of British charm and American V8 power still holds huge appeal

WORDS **GREG MACLEMAN**
PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**

In the early 1960s The Beatles had launched their full-frontal assault on the United States of America, and they stirred up a feverish hunger for English culture across the Pond. But the British Invasion extended much further than the world of music. Our cars were also becoming big news in the States, with the AC Cobra – albeit masterminded by an American – leading the charge. Just as Stateside jazz and blues was appropriated and transformed, re-emerging with a British twist, so too was American muscle. The bandwagon was rolling, and Sunbeam saw the perfect opportunity to hitch a ride westward with its Alpine Series IV.

The AC's success in 1962 represented a step-change in the way that UK sports cars were regarded on the world stage. The combination of Detroit iron and svelte British design was an intoxicating mix, both on track and on the showroom floor, and it wasn't long before the winds of change reached the until-then stuffy boardroom of the Rootes Group – or at least its quieter, less-travelled corridors.

Sunbeam's Alpine was already a hit in the USA following the model's launch in 1959, but compared to bigger-engined rivals, such as the Corvette, its 1494cc 'four' was woefully underpowered. Even an increase in capacity to 1592cc for the Series II model only resulted in a modest boost to 80bhp, while some ponies actually escaped with the Series III.

Jack Brabham had already seen the potential to repeat AC's trick by beefing up the Alpine's powerplant penned by Ken Howes and then still in Series III guise. It was clear to the Formula One champion that, in addition to the Sunbeam being a handsome car, its chassis was more than a match for greater go. Yet his suggestion to competition manager Norman Garrad that fitting a V8 engine might be a good idea fell largely on deaf ears in 1962 – or, at the very least, the idea was considered too radical to pass on to Lord Rootes.

Garrad did, however, tell his son Ian, who was West Coast sales manager for Rootes America. Not only was he taken with the idea straight away, but he also happened to live not far from Carroll Shelby, the man responsible for AC's dalliance with Ford power. Shelby was immediately given the task of shoehorning Dearborn's 260cu in small-block V8 into the engine bay of the Alpine, a Harrington-bodied example of which had won the Index of Thermal Efficiency at Le Mans in 1961. The little GT had a sweet chassis and handling that was tested in the white heat of competition. All it needed to conquer America – both market and race track – was more power.

SUNBEAM
JNR 733D

The Tiger demands a slow-in, fast-out approach to corners, but is easily controlled even if you overstep the mark

Although Shelby was confident he could meet the brief, Garrad Jnr had a healthier appreciation of the ramifications of failure so he also enlisted Ken Miles, who had helped to develop the Cobra, to assess the feasibility of the project. In double-quick time – rumoured to be as little as 10 days – and in his personal garage, Miles had built a Ford Fairlane-engined prototype with a three-speed automatic transmission, successfully proving the concept for less than $800.

By the end of April 1963, Shelby's prototype was also ready. The Ford V8 was squeezed into the Alpine's bodyshell with just minor modifications; at only 3½in longer and 2in deeper than the existing overhead-valve, 1494cc 'four', all that was required for a snug fit was to dish the bulkhead to make way for the clutch housing and reduce the depth of the inner wheelarch supports to provide clearance for the cylinder banks. Shelby had opted for a Borg-Warner T-10 four-speed manual transmission mated to a Ford Galaxie rear axle with Salisbury drive in order to cope with the additional power.

Some practical changes were made to the engine, most notably moving the oil filter to a higher, more accessible position. The tight fit wasn't without its problems, though. Changing the spark-plugs became a military operation, while poor airflow through the bay resulted in a lot of heat soak into the cabin.

Externally, Shelby's 'White Car' – as it later became known – was almost indistinguishable from the Alpine Series IV, such was the skill involved in hiding the American powerplant beneath the Sunbeam's shallow bonnet.

By July 1963, news of the prototype had reached Lord Rootes, who, though frustrated that the development had been carried out in secret and without his approval, was sufficiently impressed by both the concept and the low production cost that he had the car shipped to Coventry for assessment.

What he found on its arrival in Britain was a model weighing scarcely 200lb more than the Alpine on which it was based, yet sporting fully twice the power output and three times the amount of torque. Shelby had done it again, and an order for 3000 engines – the largest received from a single manufacturer at the time – reached Dearborn before Lord Rootes had realised that he had carried out the test drive with the handbrake still on. Project Thunderbolt was born.

Shelby's 'White Car' then disappeared until 1976, when it was found in a used-car lot in San Diego. Incredibly, the build process was barely documented, with no notes, drawings or schematics ever coming to light. The only photograph believed to show the prototype was published in *Manufacturer's News* in 1964, showing actor Tony Curtis behind the wheel.

Named the Tiger, after Sir Henry Segrave's 1925 Land Speed Record car, the Sunbeam was unveiled at the New York Auto Show in April 1964. By that summer, 11 prototypes based on the Alpine Series IV had been built by Jensen, which was contracted to produce the first batch having had experience of manufacturing its

own American V8-engined sports car, the C-V8. It also had extra capacity due to it no longer building Volvo's P1800.

The subtle yet masculine lines of the Tiger and its Q-car performance were well received by both press and public, and orders from America flooded in. The model was originally only offered Stateside, where the lazy state of tune of the 164bhp V8 was expected to marry seamlessly with the country's long, straight roads. The market's established fondness for the Alpine and availability of performance and servicing parts for Ford's small-block unit made this an obvious choice for Rootes, but a British version was promised, too, hitting the showrooms in 1965.

High-performance upgrades were readily available for those who still wanted more power, including factory-sanctioned tuning kits that were supplied through Sunbeam dealerships and marketed under the name LAT – Los Angeles Tuning. Hairier camshafts, a Holley four-barrel carburettor and Edelbrock manifolds pushed the power output from 164bhp to 245bhp, with stylish alloy wheels also on offer. The factory cars were specified with pressed steel wheels – wires were considered, but thought too weak to cope with the high levels of torque.

One year after the initial Tigers hit the US market, the model's first update arrived. In truth, little changed for the Mk1A bar cosmetic improvements: the boot, bonnet and doors were given sharper, square corners in place of the older, more rounded items. In the cockpit, meanwhile, the soft vinyl hood cover was

SUNBEAM
JNR 733D

From top: Ford engine fitted with only minor alterations; colour-coded light surrounds; hood folds neatly away – featured car has seats from an MX-5

THE KNOWLEDGE

Values

Originality talks – matching-numbers cars can be worth considerably more than reshelled examples or early ones fitted with the later engine.

Only 571 of the 7066 Tigers produced were Mk2s, with most of them exported to the USA. Very few right-hand-drive versions were built, so understandably these command a massive premium.

Look out for Alpines with retrofitted V8s, though a well-executed conversion will cost nearly as much as the real thing.

What to look for

The most important aspect of the Tiger is its complex monocoque bodyshell, which has a propensity to rust. The three-piece sills are a particular weak point, as are the rear wings, both ahead of and behind the wheels. Be wary of fresh underseal, which can hide corrosion. Hoods can leak, so check the footwells – lift the carpets and have a good nose around, particularly around the pedal box.

Ford's lightweight small-block V8 is tough and should be good for 200,000 miles with regular care and maintenance, and that durability is shared with the all-synchromesh Ford gearbox. Listen for a noisy layshaft, but don't be too concerned unless it's especially loud.

The cooling capacity of the Tiger was never fantastic even when it was new, so let the car idle from cold to make sure the thermostat opens as it should. Lift the bonnet and check for mayonnaise-like coolant residue under the oil filler cap, and other signs of overheating.

Ensure that all trim is present and correct; rarer parts such as headlight rims and radio consoles are highly sought-after today. The original pancake airbox can cost as much as £400 to replace, while the cylindrical header tanks also change hands for big sums of money.

Books

Tiger: The Making of a Sports Car Mike Taylor (Foulis & Co, ISBN 085429774)
Performance Tuning the Sunbeam Tiger Gordon Chittenden (Veloce, ISBN 1588500624)
The Book of Norman Part 1 Norman Miller
Sunbeam Alpine & Tiger: The Complete Story Graham Robson (Crowood Auto Classic, ISBN 1861266367)
Tiger: An Exceptional Motor William Carroll (Autopress, ISBN 910390266)

Clubs

Sunbeam Tiger Club (sunbeamtiger.co.uk)
Sunbeam Tiger Owners' Association (sunbeamtiger.org)

Specialists

The Sunbeam Spares Company (020 8560 3705; sunbeamspares.com)
Sunbeam Supreme (0116 274 2525; sunbeamsupreme.co.uk)

thrown out in favour of a built-in metal unit, which gave a tidier appearance and was more robust when passengers used the rear bench.

These changes were far from set in stone, though, and there was a tendency for the factory to use whichever parts it had lying around, hence why the Mk1A featured here sports updated doors and bonnet, but the older-style boot. The same holds true for badging, with a variety of different monikers being used in different markets: 'our' Tiger has 'Alpine 260' wing badges, but 'Ford 260' versions were more common.

The Tiger was destined to live in the shadow of the Cobra due to both cars sharing the same engine manufacturer, but its ties to the first Shelby car would bring an unexpected benefit in 1967 when the Cobra was fitted with Ford's new 428cu in V8, and with it any objections to the Tiger getting its paws on the 289cu in unit evaporated overnight. The new car – the Mk2 – now produced a healthy 200bhp, but, as with the Mk1, it was initially offered only for export to the United States. A few right-hand-drive versions did slip through the net, however, with the British police ordering six for use as fast interceptors, while a handful more were built for selected dealerships. All was not well, though, and the car that should have heralded Sunbeam's success barely made a squeak: just 571 Mk2s were made before production came to a halt.

It was not entirely unexpected. The storm clouds had been brewing from as early as 1964, when Chrysler had launched a bid to gain a beachhead in the European market by buying a huge swathe of shares in the Rootes Group. A gentlemen's agreement was struck with the British government to prevent the firm from falling under foreign ownership, but the sword of Damocles had always looked likely to drop: it was simply a matter of when, not if.

A protracted strike at one of the firm's subsidiaries coupled with the costly launch of the Hillman Imp proved a step too far, and, despite the best efforts of Tony Benn MP, Chrysler completed its takeover in 1967. It would be the Tiger's powerplant that brought about its downfall; the American manufacturer couldn't be seen to have had a rival's engine powering one of its headline models, and Chevy simply had nothing with which it could replace it. Chrysler's big-block V8 was far too large for the Tiger's diminutive frame, while its small-block had its distributor fitted to the rear of the engine and not the front, as on the Ford. As soon as Rootes' supply of Ford engines was exhausted, production drew to a close, with the final cars of the 7066 rolling off the Jensen line on 27 June 1967.

'Where you might expect understeer, you instead find a sharp turn-in'

Getting into the Tiger, it's plain to see why Chrysler completed the production run, even though the Ford engine rankled. The doors close with a reassuring clunk, and the thin-rimmed steering wheel framing the attractive dashboard with large, easy-to-read Jaeger instruments feels instantly homely. It's well appointed, too: if you find the driving position unusual, as some do, you can adjust the steering column accordingly, while wind-up windows improve comfort when the roof is fitted. Everything has a solid, well-built and purposeful feel, from the gearlever to the thunderous V8 rumble prompted with a turn of the dash-mounted ignition key.

Few cars are such a joy to drive slowly as the Tiger, and pulling away easily in first (or any other gear you fancy) soon has you wafting down the road to the accompaniment of an eight-pot symphony; you hardly need to touch the accelerator to keep it rolling along. First and second are tall, but the Tiger is just as content in top while driving through town. If you never escaped the traffic, you could be convinced that it was more bark than bite.

On open roads, however, it soon becomes clear that there is much more to the Tiger than simply boulevard cruising. The Alpine's Burman recirculating-ball steering box was thrown out in favour of an Engineering Products rack-and-pinion set-up: it reduces the turning circle and makes parking at full lock a five-point chore, but it loads up beautifully when pressing on.

The Alpine's near-perfect balance was carried over to the Tiger, and the handling remains predictable and secure despite the extra weight of the V8. Where you might expect to encounter understeer, you're met

Alpine's well-established and pretty lines were carried over virtually unchanged for the Tiger

SUNBEAM TIGER

Sold/number built 1964-'68/7066 (6495 Mk1s)
Construction steel monocoque with optional detachable hardtop
Engine all-iron, ohv 4261/4727cc V8, twin-choke carburettor
Max power 164bhp @ 4400rpm-200bhp @ 4400rpm
Max torque 258lb ft @ 2200rpm-282lb ft @ 2400rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic springs; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 13ft 3¾in (4057mm)
Width 5ft ¾in (1543mm)
Height 4ft 3¾in (1315mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 2½in (2200mm)
Weight 2587lb (1176kg)
0-60mph 9.4-7.5 secs
Top speed 117-125mph **Mpg** 15-22
Price new £1446 (1965)

instead with a sharp turn-in that makes for a surprisingly easy-to-place package.

"You hear a lot of pub chat about the back end stepping out very quickly, but they're much more driveable than you would think," says owner Tristan Bradfield. "With the Panhard rod added to the back and a decent set of tyres, they do go around corners very well. You tend to have to go into bends slowly and out quickly, but the 258lb ft lets you do that easily."

The Tiger certainly never snaps or becomes wildly uncontrollable. On the contrary, the minimal body roll adds to its assured nature in corners, and you soon learn to trust the little roadster implicitly.

It boasts a 117mph top speed, but the most fun to be extracted from the Tiger is when hustling it through the bends. The redline is at 4700rpm, but the torque-heavy performance of the Ford small-block V8 begins to wane at around 3500rpm. The result is instantly available power for blasting out of corners or brisk overtaking. It's a joyous drive that begs you to use its potential to the full.

The Ford four-speed 'box does nothing to hinder your progress; a smooth action allied to a well-defined gate inspires confidence with each shift, while the slightly sharp 10in clutch responds best during quick upshifts. Warner baulk-ring synchromesh is used on every gear and offers seamless, graunch-free changes.

Most of the time the optional hardtop is in the garage and the soft-top is safely stowed, allowing the full eight-cylinder, twin-tailpipe soundtrack to reach the driver as well as startled passers-by. And what a soundtrack: a sharp bark on start-up, a deep rumble when setting off and a sonorous howl while tickling the upper limits of the rev range are like mainlining excitement. It's an addiction that runs deep in the veins of Tiger aficionados.

It's not difficult to see why this car has such a loyal and dedicated following, and after even a short blast through the countryside you feel a twinge of regret that the Tiger was as much a victim of circumstance as it was its own success. It is the epitome of the right model at the wrong time. From the moment Chrysler's envious eyes first settled on the Rootes Group in 1964, the model's fate was decided; the American firm's engines had already been assessed and found wanting even before the first two prototypes had been built. The fact that such a radical idea had been backed by an otherwise conservative Rootes – and the risks taken in developing the car in secret – is proof enough of the idea's promise. The combination of plenty of power, sleek, well-proportioned bodywork and, most importantly, a price that undercut every one of its rivals should have brought even greater success, both on the track and on Rootes' balance sheets. Sadly, the brakes were applied just as it was coming on cam.

And that should leave a slightly sour taste, much like getting part-way through a book before having it slammed unceremoniously shut on your fingers. All we ever wanted to do was to read the next chapter.

***Thanks to** Sunbeam Tiger Club (sunbeamtiger.co.uk)*

ALAIN FOURET
7734 KV
SUNBEAM

MISSION: LE MANS

The Lister Tiger prototype only made it to Le Mans' test day in 1964, but could the Sunbeam do any better at the Classic?

WORDS **JULIAN BALME** PHOTOGRAPHY **JEFF BLOXHAM/ERIC SAWYER/*C&SC*/DAVID DAVENHALL**

RICHARD MILLE
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The mission appeared to be straightforward on paper: take the prototype Le Mans Sunbeam Tiger back to France, 50 years after its first appearance there, and complete the Classic. Trouble was, the enduro hadn't been kind to the venerable Coventry firm and its V8-powered sports car – although back in the summer of 1964 the vast majority of its problems were of its own making.

Rootes had always had a keen competition department, although, tellingly, throughout the 1950s it enjoyed greater success in rallying. At the time, Le Mans was the race every enthusiast was aware of, not least because of the similarity between a number of its entrants and those cars found in local showrooms. It was therefore logical that any ambitious sports car manufacturer should have some form of presence in the 24-hour event – hence the first works foray with the Sunbeam Alpine in '61.

This was a smart, coachbuilt (literally, by Worthing-based bus builder Harrington) coupé based on the Series II Alpine. At its first attempt, Rootes hit the jackpot, snatching the Index of Performance from under the noses of the French Panhard brigade and the more race-orientated Lotus Elites. Despite two further attempts, this would be the Alpine's sole success – indeed its only finish.

The V8 Alpine project had been signed off by the Rootes hierarchy by mid-1963, and subsequently some form of sporting activity was factored in as part of the company's launch

Gordon England hares across the damp track for traditional-style start of the final Le Mans Classic race

Gordon slithers away at the start of a fraught final Plateau 5 contest

plans. In the USA – the car's target market – Americans were becoming increasingly familiar with 'Lee Mons', in the main due to the achievements of the nation's drivers there, so it made sense to build a car – or cars – to contest the event. From then on, sadly, the quality of decision-making was somewhat lacking.

It didn't help that the man initially charged with making it happen, Norman Garrad, father of Ian, whose enthusiasm had, in effect, made him the creator of the Tiger, left the competition department in February '64, two months before the first test in France. His replacement was Marcus Chambers, who was horrified by what he found. He recalled in 1980: "The management had laid down that the cars were to be built on an Alpine monocoque, in turn the basis of the new Sunbeam Tiger. This and the fact that they were to be designed, built and tested in less than a year, imposed a terrible handicap on the whole project."

Brian Lister had been contracted to build a prototype and two racers. He voiced what every race fan would think: if the car is running in the prototype class, why not build a spaceframe and put it under an aluminium rendition of the body, to save weight and enable the use of better suspension components? Rootes refused. Ironically the race cars – with their broader, Kamm-tail behinds, raked 'screens and fastback roof – weren't obviously Tigers. In hindsight, this was perhaps a good thing.

The shape was the work of Rootes' in-house stylist, Ron Wisdom. Although reasonably attractive compared with the low-slung Cobra Daytona or Bizzarrini, it looked too tall and too short. Even worse was an estimated 20% weight penalty over standard, making the Tiger the second-heaviest car in the '64 race at 2706lb – 160lb more than the Daytona.

As if all of this wasn't depressing enough, the 4.2-litre (260cu in) V8 secured from Ford for the production Tiger had already been superseded by a larger 4.7-litre (289cu in) unit, which in race trim meant a shortfall of 100bhp. But Rootes was committed to the smaller engine. The more powerful lump required exactly the same space, so cooling and access would have been the same. With little or no V8 experience, the competition department had to source its 260cu in engines from Carroll Shelby, the same guy who was running 289 motors in his cars…

Despite these encumbrances, by mid-March Lister and his team had a running prototype, registered 7734 KV, the very car we're taking back to Le Mans. It's widely accepted that this is also the first 'Tiger' built in England and was AF1 (Alpine Ford), which in turn became Project 870 – the test platform for the proposed production version. It wasn't referred to as such initially, but today the original coupé is known in Sunbeam circles as 'The Mule' and was used as a development hack until Le Mans, where it appeared at the test day but not the race itself.

From the outset, it was obvious the car had issues. A shakedown at Mallory Park three days before the Le Mans test revealed that the handling of the future Tiger (it was briefly

TIGERS ON TRACK

The two 'production' racers – registered ADU 179B (number 8) and ADU 180B (9) – were driven at the 1964 Le Mans by Keith Ballisat/Claude Dubois and Peter Procter/Jimmy Blumer. They were virtually identical to 'The Mule' bar the rear valance, quick-jack lifting brackets and front wing vents. Unlike the prototype, though, there was no facility to get hot air out through the bonnet.

All three ran 260cu in V8s fed by two four-barrel Carter carbs, each rated at 460cfm, which was probably drowning the 4.2-litre motor with fuel. It wasn't until Des O'Dell arrived at Rootes that the works got a handle on the small-block Fords, and it's telling that none of the rally cars ever ran more than one four-barrel carburettor.

Rootes had the technical nous, but didn't have the time to deploy it. Works engineer and driver Bernard Unett was loaned 180B (179B was sold at the same time as 7734 KV), which became competitive during 1965 against the E-types, 250LMs and 26Rs with his development. Needless to say, he ran the bigger 4.7-litre engine, but he also revamped the rear set-up using parallel links and wider tyres.

It was raced at the Goodwood Revival in the capable hands of Rob Huff and is the only one of the three coupés to reside in the UK, Tony Eckford having owned it for more than 15 years. ADU 179B lives in Orange County, CA, with Darrell Mountjoy.

RICHARD MILLE
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7734 KV
SUNBEAM

Left, clockwise from main: night swap from Rich Wall to Gordon; in the paddock, with Le Mans Alpine; Dunlop knock-ons; T-10 four-speed transmission

‘The bar had been grinding against the track when I was on the redline in top’

Tiger roars past the start-finish grandstand in the early hours of Sunday morning

called Thunderbolt at that point) was far from ideal. While in France, drivers Peter Procter and Keith Ballisat were critical of just about every aspect of the vehicle.

Ex-Rootes engineer Mike Parkes – who was also at the circuit with his new employer, Ferrari – found himself taking The Mule for a spin. “One lap was enough for Michael to confirm everything Keith had said,” recalled Chambers. “Oil surge, axle tramp, poor brakes and overheating – and a Parkes lap of 4 mins 26 secs against a Ferrari time of 3 mins 47 secs.”

Back in England, the team experimented with damper and spring rates, moved the rear Panhard rod and upgraded the front anti-roll bar. This all helped, but misgivings continued right up to the eve of the race when the number 8 Tiger ran its main bearings after qualifying. Chambers suggested to Rootes that it withdrew gracefully, but, again, he was overruled.

Subsequently, both Tigers had retired from the race within nine hours – a broken piston after three hours in car number 8 and a broken crank in number 9. A modest 18th was the highest position that either achieved.

Blame for the near-inevitable failure was laid at the door of the V8s. As Chambers put it: “I had consulted Shelby before the race, but he did not want to offer any advice and was hardly polite when we asked for some help – a curious attitude to take to a customer who had just bought four special race engines. Brian Lister was probably more disappointed than anyone else. He had put so much effort in and felt that it reflected on his judgement, but we were really on a hiding to nothing from the start.”

Fifty years later, could we better the factory efforts? There were no longer concerns about the motor because half a century of racing and development has led to professional builders supplying far more reliable units, although race-prepped 260s are still not that common.

Lack of regular running in historic events meant ‘The Mule’ was pretty unsorted, and, after a meticulously accurate restoration, 7734 KV brilliantly reflected the car the works drivers encountered back in ’64. It has been owned by Tiger enthusiasts Chris and Lorraine Gruys for the past 11 years. They were keen to see it return to Le Mans in its anniversary year, so, with the help of drivers Gordon England and Rich Wall – plus yours truly – they shipped the car from their home in the USA.

A brief sortie at Snetterton demonstrated that the car was hugely underdeveloped, yet this served us well because our approach became much less ambitious: finishing was the primary objective. Handling was the issue: carrying any speed led to massive understeer, which flipped to oversteer – sometimes even before the apex and often quite unexpectedly. Coupled to an inconsistent brake pedal and an engine that faltered at around 5200rpm, our work would be cut out around Le Mans.

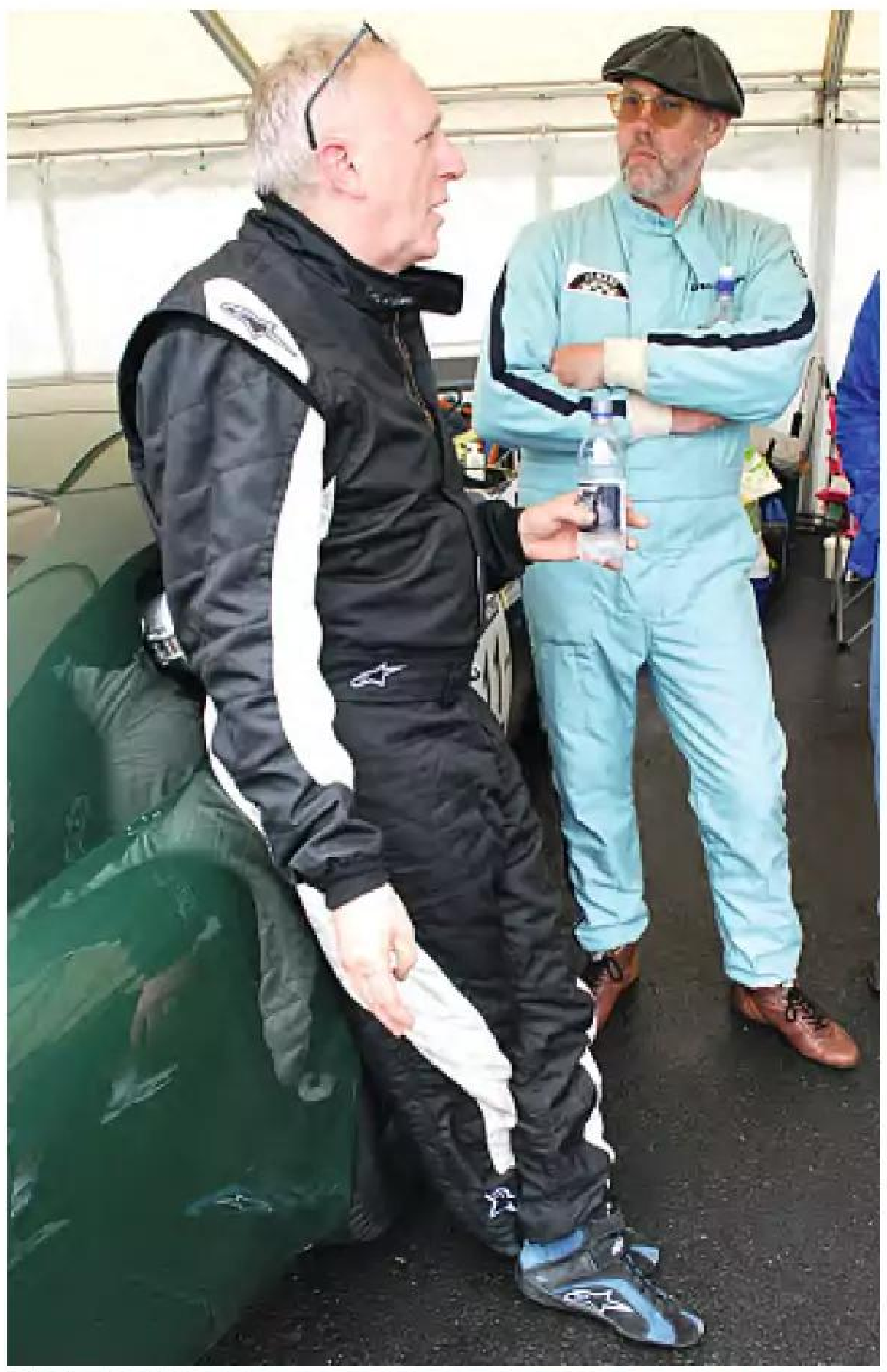
The entry for the Le Mans Classic is divided into six grids by age, and each group gets three 42-minute races over the 24 hours. The format works well: if you do encounter a problem,

Gordon pits after just a lap of the final race, fearing a terminal oil leak – it was diagnosed as a couple of loose rocker-box bolts there is a chance to fix it and not miss any track time. There are two qualifying sessions – one in daylight, the other in the dark. I'd elected not to drive at night – I'd done it 10 years before in an Elan and it terrified me. So I got the lion's share of the daylight practice, yet still managed to scare myself, not once but three times.

The modern part of the circuit is featureless and barren, a ribbon of grey running between wide-open gravel traps. These help disguise a number of blind brows and corners. Fumbling around trying to recall where everything went and reacquaint myself with the Tiger proved to be quite a challenge, and I'd barely completed my first lap before adding to my problems. An 'enthusiastically' driven Jaguar E-type dived up the inside at Indianapolis, only to start understeering towards my – sorry, Chris and Lorraine's – door. Prudently, I took to the rumble strips but dropped two wheels into the gravel and knocked a bolt off the clamp that attaches the front end of an anti-tramp bar to the leading edge of the offside leaf spring.

The subsequent tinkling noise from behind my seat was disconcerting, but it turned to horror when I discovered the bar had been grinding against the track surface for the rest of my laps, including three sections of the circuit where it was on the rev limiter (5800rpm) in top, at a speed in excess of 125mph.

A number of understeer/oversteer moments punctuated my time on the track, notably at the end of the start/finish straight, at the chicane before the Dunlop Bridge, and at the Ford chicane where – even though I had been advised against it – the car still wanted to cut across the kerbs irrespective of what I was



RICHARD MILLE

Clockwise from top: Gordon and Julian compare notes; Julian's practice was impeded by a flailing anti-tramp bar, clouted during avoiding action; famous emblem on keyfob; Lister with Elan and Mini Marcos in the collecting area; Gordon pits for the mandatory 60 secs stop

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER LE MANS?

Marcus Chambers' deputy, Ian Hall, used 7734 KV for the remainder of 1964, but it was sold via the Sports Car Centre of Northampton for £1450 in February '65. The exact trail of its keepers over the following four years is unrecorded in the logbook, but it was raced several times again – initially throughout 1965 by Roger and John Eccles, who installed a 4.7-litre (289cu in) motor. The Eccles (father and son) are thought to have last competed in 7734 KV for a Redex Trophy round on 28 November 1965 at Brands Hatch – the only known occasion on which all three Le Mans Tigers competed together.

From the start of the '66 season until April 1968, the car's custodianship is unclear, mainly because it was 'owned' and used by racers and traders who didn't register it with the DVLA; it may be that some hotshoes were merely loaned the Lister. The likely chain after the Eccles was Gerry Marshall, Jack Alderslade, John Pearson and John Scott-Davies. During this time, 7734 KV was painted metallic blue with an offset white stripe.

Peter Wynn-Jones bought the car – by then painted red – in April 1968. He certainly hillclimbed it, but KV's racing days were over, compounded two years later when its previous UK keeper, Ronald Haig Kambourian, took the car to Wood & Pickett in London for a full interior and exterior makeover in a deep metallic burgundy colour. He said at the time: "The entire cost of the cosmetics was a ridiculous £2400, which was almost three times what I paid for it."

In late 1972/'73, Kambourian advertised 7734 KV in *Road & Track* and *AutoWeek*, and he eventually sold it to a buyer in California – Dick Barker of San Diego.

Barker owned the Lister Tiger until 2003 and was responsible for its well researched and accurate restoration. Such were the lengths he went to, it wasn't until 1997 that the prototype was revealed to the public at that year's Tigers United in Eureka, California – the only time the two Le Mans race cars plus 'The Mule' have appeared together since 1965.

Father and son Roger and John Eccles, here at Mallory Park sprint, raced KV several times in '65

RICHARD MILLE

Clockwise from far left: Christian Bradfield spots loose rocker-box bolts; Tiger burns spilt oil as it storms out of the pits; kicking up dust towards Dunlop Bridge; mission accomplished – a relieved and highly delighted Gordon reaches the finish line

24h LE MANS
RICHARD MILLE
11
ALAIN FIGARET

> *'It was a tense time at the end as we waited for him to reappear, but reappear he did'*

asking it to do. Nevertheless, despite being preoccupied with looking after and wrestling with the Tiger, it was an unforgettable stint and an incredible privilege to roar down the Mulsanne Straight in a Sunbeam built 50 years earlier specifically for the job. The image of Leo Voyazides' red Ford GT40 thundering by as we both passed the Hunaudières restaurant will live with me for ever.

Two of the Tiger's three races were in the dark and the last was in drizzle, on what had become a treacherous surface. The poor old Mule was also starting to carry some minor mechanical maladies. A rocker on the motor had snapped after the first race – a result, we suspected, of the valve springs being too strong. Thankfully, there were no other component casualties in its demise, and replacing it took less than half an hour. Unfortunately, one of the covers removed to carry out the repair didn't seat properly, and in the second race – in the early hours of Sunday morning – an increasing amount of smoke filled the cockpit. Fortunately, it wasn't enough to prevent a finish and was quickly rectified back in the paddock. So there was just the final race to complete.

Gordon took the start, but was into the pits after only one lap and looking to retire the car. The Tiger was still smoking and, with the track being slippery enough without our car adding its oil to the mix, we pushed it into the garage. Feeling deflated, most of the team headed back to the paddock, but Christian Bradfield (competition secretary of the Sunbeam Tiger Club) cleverly noticed that the car hadn't dropped any oil in the three minutes that it had been standing. A rocker-box bolt or two were found to be loose and there were still traces of oil on the exhaust manifolds, but the engine wasn't bleeding. Two minutes later, Gordon had rejoined the fray.

It was a tense time as other cars crossed the line and we waited for him to reappear, but reappear he did. For myriad reasons – not least history and the sheer hell of it – we managed to contrive a highly unlikely result and take the chequered flag at Le Mans in a Sunbeam Lister Tiger coupé, exactly 50 years after the Rootes effort had so spectacularly failed.

***Thanks to** Gordon England; Chris and Lorraine Gruys; Christian Bradfield and the Sunbeam Tiger Club (sunbeamtiger.co.uk)*

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ADU 31
SUNBE

From Humber Road to the Acropolis

The Sunbeam Tiger's foray on to the special stage was ill-fated, but this freshly restored ex-works example has won many admirers

WORDS **JULIAN BALME** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

This car was rallied in Carnival Red with a black top, or as here

For a full-on works competition car representing its creators' ultimate specification, the cockpit of this particular dark blue sports car is remarkably civilised. Apart from a huge, ultra-rare, 8000rpm Smiths tachometer dominating the sight line in its own distinct, dash-mounted pod, everything else is very much as per the showroom. A pair of non-standard switches controlling the extra foglights are discreetly installed in the front of the centrally mounted glovebox between the occupants.

Further investigation reveals piping exiting from the gearbox hump. It runs the length of the transmission tunnel before popping out via the rear bulkhead, in an attempt to clear hot air from the back of the engine compartment. An extra brake servo sits atop the parcel shelf, too. On the passenger side, there is a map pocket built into the door panel and a brace of stopwatches mounted straight ahead, but the typically classy yet conservative Rootes cabin – complete with black carpeting and red seat piping – hardly exudes purpose. It's a perfect illustration of why the Sunbeam Tiger was both a brilliant rally car and a lousy one.

In the book of motorsport 'what ifs', the Tiger is worthy of its own chapter. Having failed miserably with the Lister Le Mans coupé, the Coventry firm rightly returned to its rallying comfort zone. Yet despite the deployment of some of the sport's greatest exponents – from comps manager Marcus Chambers downwards – the car's 18-month career merely hinted at what might have been. It's only recently, in historics, that the model has finally shone.

> 'The cabin is infused with an eight-cylinder bellow unheard of in any other British '60s rally car'

Of the seven works cars built to contest their all-too-brief campaign, the one here, ADU 311B, holds the honour of being the factory's final entry in an international rally. Just why it had so much potential becomes blindingly obvious once you're behind the wheel.

Turn the ignition key to its first position and the SU fuel pump begins to tick. Three dabs of the throttle then crank the key further and the 4.2-litre Ford V8 awakens lethargically. The tall gearstick starts to shimmy by your right knee (it's a left-hooker), giving the initial impression that selection might be vague. It isn't, but it's far from slick either. Agricultural is the nature of the truck-derived Toploader gearbox. With revs barely above idle, you ease the firm clutch out and the Tiger gently moves forward. The huge wheel – originally fitted to a big Humber saloon – requires a fair bit of effort to turn at low speeds, further hampered by a deficit of lock that would have a Triumph Spitfire owner clutching their sides. Driven normally, however, with sedate gearchanges, the two-seater swiftly – and, more importantly, effortlessly – reaches legal cruising speeds. Once in fourth the crew can relax, in effect engaging autopilot until landing or some more spirited form of flying is required.

On long-haul rallies, where mile upon mile of road sections were covered between special stages, the Sunbeam came into its own. Which would you prefer – the constant whine of straight-cut gears or the gentle burble of an understressed American V8? Rootes' build quality was arguably always superior to that of its BMC and Standard Triumph rivals, and no doubt that helped to make the car kinder to its inhabitants. In competition terms, however, that compromised the car's performance. With no effort having been made to reduce weight, lugging the extra pounds ultimately held back even this friskiest of cats. The Tiger's homologated weight was that of the stock car, 1147kg, compared with, say, Ford's ridiculously optimistic 980kg for the Falcon Sprint. It didn't matter that the Detroit saloon could never come close to its target; the figure gave plenty of wriggle-room, whereas the Sunbeam could barely afford the removal of its ashtray to stay legal.

The competition car was also hampered by its motor. Ford's small-block V8 had been designed at 221cu in (3.6 litres) but was switfly developed up to 260 and then 289cu in, all within two years. Sadly for Tiger devotees, the deal with Henry Ford II was concluded in the autumn of 1963 by Lord Rootes himself, when the engine was middle-aged. Whether Lee Iacocca, fearing competition for his new Mustang, purposely saddled the British firm with the outdated motor is open to conjecture; likewise Carroll Shelby's recommendation that the Lister-bodied Tigers run with the 260 at Le Mans. Either way, the smaller engine produced just 164bhp out of the box, compared with 271bhp for the Hi-Po 289. By the time the MkII Tiger was launched with the 4.7-litre V8, the rally programme was history.

The 4.2 also had a habit of blowing itself apart. Anything over 5250rpm was considered dangerous territory by the Humber Road engineers, but today 6000rpm is a realistic redline in a well-developed car. Mind you, at the originally advised 5000rpm maximum, the car was still doing 120mph and, with peak torque of 258lb ft at just 2200rpm, it was pointless to over-enthusiastically rev the engine. It's hard to resist nailing the throttle, however, but not because of any fairground, neck-snapping acceleration. Far from it; it's the sound that is so seductive. All of a sudden, the cabin is infused with an eight-cylinder bellow unheard of in any other British '60s rally car.

Attacking the multitude of hairpins up the Col de Turini accompanied by that glorious noise couldn't help but encourage drivers such as Peter Harper, Andrew Cowan or Peter Riley. As Riley recalled: "I was on a recce with Rosemary Smith in the Maritime Alps. We were having something to eat when we heard a fruity six-cylinder turn up outside. It was Timo Mäkinen in a Big Healey. He enquired about the Tiger so I just said 'it's okay, nothing special' – and tossed him the keys. He was gone for half an hour. 'Fantashteek!' was the only word he could utter on his return." Riley competed twice in a Tiger for Rootes. "They hadn't had the cars long and they were woefully under-developed, but you knew they were going to be good," he said. "The Healey was definitely on borrowed time – sadly it never happened."

Riley drove a Tiger again in 1988, in a Historic Sports Car Club enduro event during which, despite not finishing, his love of the cars was reignited. He was so much quicker than the car's owner, one Julian Balme, that he ended up running out of fuel. Within months he had acquired ADU 311B – the Tiger he had used on that early recce – and ran the car with his son Tim for a couple of years before laying it up with the intention of rebuilding it. When Riley junior left to live in New Zealand, it was decided to move the project on. "Don't worry, it's found a good home," he told me.

TWINMASTER
halda

Clockwise from above: huge, thin-rimmed wheel is better suited to the Humber it usually went in – note rev counter in pod on dash top; Halda Twinmaster; evocative Rootes Group crest; map pockets are screwed on to the co-driver's door card

ROOTES GROUP
SUNBEAM

ALSO IN THE LITTER

ADU 312B

1964 Geneva Rally, driven by Rosemary Smith/Margaret McKenzie: 20th overall, third in class.
1965 Rallye Monte-Carlo, driven by Peter Harper/Ian Hall: fourth overall, first in class.
1965 Alpine Rally, driven by Peter Harper/Mike Hughes: disqualified.
Owned and run in historic events for many years by the late Don Pither and later refurbished by Oliver Harding.

AHP 294B

1964 Geneva Rally, driven by Tiny Lewis/Barry Hughes: 11th overall, first in class.
1965 Tulip Rally, driven by Peter Riley/Robin Turvey: did not finish.
1966 Rallye Monte-Carlo, driven by Peter Harper/Robin Turvey: did not finish.
Owned for many years by former Sunbeam Tiger Club chair David Duncanson. Later auctioned by Brightwells.

AHP 295B

1964 Geneva Rally, driven by Peter Riley/Robin Turvey: 15th overall, second in class.
1965 Rallye Monte-Carlo, driven by Andrew Cowan/Robin Turvey: 11th overall, first in class.
1965 Alpine Rally, driven by Ian Hall/Don Barrow: did not finish.
1965 International Police Rally, driven by John Gott/Donald Nicholson: first overall.
Destroyed in an accident while being raced by its then owner Malcolm Sears at Oulton Park in 1971.

AHP 483B

1964 RAC Rally, driven by Rupert Jones/John Clegg: 45th overall.
1965 Targa Florio, driven by Peter Harper/Rupert Jones: second in class (car ran with 289cu in V8 in prototype class).
Restored and now owned by David McDermott in Colorado, USA.

FRW 667C

1966 Rallye Monte-Carlo, driven by Andrew Cowan/Brian Coyle: did not finish.
Restored and reshelled by Mike Harrison in 1990, currently owned by André Bloom.

FRW 668C

1966 Tulip Rally, driven by Peter Harper/Robin Turvey: third overall, first in class.
Unrestored and owned for many years by Tiger historian Graham Rood.

Clockwise from above: earlier bonnet featured an air scoop; V8 was rebuilt, too; Minilite wheels, although on some stages steels were fitted at the front; extra brake servo on the rear bulkhead

That home belonged to rally enthusiast Paul Roberts, who had already employed Jonathan Everard to rebuild his ex-Pat Moss Healey, URX 727. The JME boss was reluctant, but he eventually took on the two-year rebuild, tapping into the knowledge of Tiger experts Graham Rood (who had also owned chassis 311), Graham Vickery and Dave McDermott. Jonathan and his team had barely finished sorting the car's teething problems when he tragically succumbed to a heart attack while on holiday in August 2010.

During its competition years, this particular Tiger, the first to be completed by the works, appeared in two liveries and underwent myriad body modifications, including four different bonnets. Originally turned out in Carnival Red with a black hardtop, the car was informally entered in the 1964 San Martino di Castrozza Rally. The firm had received such bad press over the Le Mans debacle that everyone at the factory was nervous that a further disaster in October's Geneva Rally would lead to more egg-covered faces. Hence the car's low-key, toe-in-the-water entry, piloted by Peter Harper and Ian Hall, two weeks before its big debut. The rally was held in the Dolomites and suited the Tiger perfectly, but, despite leading by some margin, the car failed to finish, running out of fuel and consequently being excluded. For ADU 311B, the die had been cast: out of the seven international rallies in which it took part, it would finish only one.

Following its Italian adventure, 311 was only used as a recce car until its rally career proper was flagged away by none other than film star Richard Burton at the start of the '65 Tulip Rally. Encouraged by the Tiger's successes on both the Geneva and the Monte, great things were hoped for in The Netherlands. It proved to be mildly embarrassing, however, when both cars did not finish as a result of freak weather and the team failing to carry snow tyres. Harper and Hall were in the featured car when they met a French *camionette* on the wrong side of the road and were forced to take to a ditch to avoid it. Repaired and sporting a full-length bonnet scoop, the car received further abuse when front brake failure resulted in the assault of a house, prompting its departure from the Alpine Rally. The luckless Ian Hall, sitting in for Peter Riley, was behind the wheel.

'They met a French camionette on the wrong side of the road and took to a ditch to avoid it'

A lack of correct oil sidelined the Tiger on its next rally, the Scottish, crewed by Andrew Cowan and Alan Redpath. Because the V8 is so tight in the bay, the oil filter is mounted remotely in a circular bracket, upright, next to the engine. It slipped down during the bumpy stages and was punctured by a steering joint. The car ran on the exotic – and hard-to-find – vegetable-based Super Shell, but the crew had to top up with common mineral oil. The two types were considered incompatible, which, along with worrying suspension damage, led to the car's considered withdrawal. As the lone entry on the 1965 RAC Rally, 311 lasted barely three stages before signalling its desire to stop. Harper had attacked the bumps of Rolleston Camp, during which the engine moved forward and the fan took a bite out of the radiator. Harper and co-driver Don Barrow limped the car on to Somerset, but retired in Bristol with a blown engine.

Ironically, the only rally the Tiger was destined to finish was undoubtedly the toughest, the tortuous Acropolis on some of Greece's worst roads. In an event on which the paved sections were allegedly worse than the loose, only 40 out of 105 cars finished. Shepherded by Harper and Hall once more, 311, by then resplendent in dark blue and brought up to '66 FIA spec, ran faultlessly bar one stage when a throttle linkage broke. Achieving competitive times on most of the speed sections against stern opposition, the car finished a creditable seventh and won the Group 3 class. Barely a month passed before 311 took part in its last rally, the Gulf London, a strenuous event from the capital to Scotland and back. Despite setting a cracking pace, Harper and co-driver Robin Turvey ran out of time and were excluded after losing a wheel on a forest stage in North Yorkshire.

The handicap system deployed in rallying had never been particularly favourable where the Tiger was concerned, and, following the launch of Rootes' Mini competitor, the Imp, it was decided to close the operation and concentrate on the smaller, rear-engined car. It was a huge shame, but, with the Chrysler takeover, the sports model was soon to be discontinued. It would be 25 years before the likes of Don Pither and Jayne Wignall spearheaded a revival and showed what these charismatic cars really could achieve.

***Thanks to** Paul Roberts; Graham Rood, author of The Works Tigers; JME Healeys (jmehealeys.co.uk)*

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